

I have been writing  
- a corpus-based study of the Perfect  
Progressive in Present-day American  
English

by  
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# Abstract

This thesis looks at the use of the Perfect Progressive in Present-day American English. The overall aim is to provide a comprehensive overview of the use of the Perfect Progressive in Present-day American English, and a secondary aim is to shed some more light on this grammatical construction than has previously been done in reference works on the English language.

The research carried out in this thesis is both quantitative and qualitative and the primary source of material is the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The theoretical foundations are based on previous work by grammarians and linguists.

To accommodate the scope and time constraints the focus is placed on three of the five genres found in COCA; *Spoken*, *Fiction* and *Academic Journals*. In addition, three verbs that frequently occur in the Perfect Progressive within these genres, namely *work*, *look* and *live*, were chosen.

The results show that there is a difference in the distribution of the Perfect Progressive depending on genre. There is also a difference in the distribution with regard to tense. In addition, I found that the Perfect Progressive is highly dependent on context for its meaning to come across, in other words, the sentence containing the Perfect Progressive seen in isolation is not always sufficient for the correct interpretation of the intended meaning.

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# 1 Introduction

## Hypothesis:

*There is a difference in the distribution and use of the Perfect Progressive depending on genre and tense.*

This hypothesis is the foundation of this thesis which has been given the title “*I have been writing – a corpus-based study of the Perfect Progressive in Present-day American English*”. The main focus of this thesis will be on the use of the Perfect Progressive in Present-day American English. The material on which this thesis is based has been retrieved from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and it is supplemented by previous work carried out by grammarians and linguists. I have come across no similar research concerning the Perfect Progressive to compare my results or methods to. However, some linguists (e.g. Biber et al.: 1999) provide insights into some features of this verb form and serve as background for the current study.

This topic has been chosen because of my fascination for this particular grammatical construction. I have always been intrigued by its form, and by the meanings it has the ability to express. The Perfect Progressive is an element within English grammar which has not gotten the attention it deserves. To illustrate this, I refer to the comprehensive work *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber et al.: 1999), where it is only mentioned briefly under the heading “Complex combinations of aspect and voice”. What is written about the Perfect Progressive there takes up less than 10 sentences. My main reasons for choosing the Perfect Progressive is therefore the fact that so little has been written about it and also its form and meaning. I chose to look at the Perfect Progressive in American English, because this is the variety of English that I have adopted.

Borrowing a few words from Tobin (1993: preface), this thesis will “deal with the very ‘fuzzy’ category of Aspect in English”. Swales makes use of the same adjective when he writes “genre remains a fuzzy concept, a somewhat loose term of art” (1990:33). To try to avoid this turning into a “fuzzy” thesis and to narrow the scope to accommodate the place and time constraints, I have chosen to look at three genres within COCA and focus on three verbs within these genres.

The genres are *Spoken*, *Fiction* and *Academic Journals* and the verbs are *work*, *live* and *look*. How these genres and verbs were chosen is explained in detail in Chapter 3.

In the introduction to his book *Aspect*, Bernard Comrie (1976:11) says that “in the discussion of aspect, as opposed to many other areas of linguistics, there is no generally accepted terminology”. Some linguists make use of the term Perfective Aspect instead of the Perfect Aspect (e.g. Dypedahl et al. 2006, Quirk et al. 2005), and in turn also the Perfective Progressive instead of the Perfect Progressive. It is in the world of linguistics nearly impossible to say that one linguist is more correct than another, since terminological fuzziness abounds. However, there is according to Comrie (1976:62), a “tendency to confuse perfect and perfective” (further details in Section 2.0). Leech in his book *Meaning and the English Verb* uses the term *Perfect* Aspect, while in *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English language*, a book which Leech has co-authored, the term *Perfective* is used. Some linguists also refer to the Perfect Progressive as the perfect continuous tense (cf. Thompson & Martinet 1981:158). The terminology used in this thesis is the one which seems to be used most frequently, i.e. the *Perfect Progressive*.

(...), there has been great controversy over the expression *aspect*, particularly in its range of application to English, and views about what, if anything, actually constitutes aspect in English, and what does not, have been widely divergent (Fenn 1987:23).

What Fenn describes here fits well with the quote by Tobin (1993:15) below and with Comrie’s claim that there is no consensus with regard to terminology within this area of linguistics.

In general, it is possible to say that ‘aspect’ and *Aktionsart* in English have been the subject of fewer studies than ‘tense’ and ‘modality’. Part of the blame surely rests on the general view that English is a ‘tense’ rather than an ‘aspect’ language, at least from the point of view of the morphology of the language (Tobin 1993:15).

Even though looking at aspect as a category of the English verb phrase is an exhaustive task and one that would not fit between the covers of this thesis, a fraction of this discussion will be included when I look at whether or not the Perfect Progressive constitutes a tense or an aspect. In Chapter 2, I will argue that since the Perfect Progressive has the same possible meanings/functions as the Perfect Aspect and the Progressive Aspect, it must be an aspect and not a tense. However, I too have chosen to write the Perfect Progressive and not the Perfect Progressive *Aspect* for the most part and this is to accommodate the norm of grammarians and

linguists and for the sake of simplicity, not because I do not see the Perfect Progressive as an aspect.

Even though descriptive/theoretical linguists and computational linguists use corpora for very different purposes, they share a common belief: that it is important to base one's analysis of language on real data – actual instances of speech and writing – rather than on data that are contrived or “made-up” (Meyer 2002:xiii).

With more than 400 million words from the last 20 years, divided into 5 genres, I feel confident that COCA is the right corpus to use in this thesis. The text samples found in COCA have been gathered from sources such as Television shows, books and Academic Journals, so the language is real and it should be fairly representative of Present-day American English. Prior to this thesis I have conducted two small “pilot studies” which looked at the use of the Perfect Progressive in American English and COCA was used in both. These studies showed that COCA is a good corpus to use when investigating the Perfect Progressive.

While Chomsky is wrong to characterise corpus linguistics as butterfly collecting. I [Bas Aarts] think we can all agree that some strands of corpus linguistics run the risk of not being taken seriously. I am thinking specifically of studies that are exclusively concerned with the presentation of frequency data as a goal in itself without couching those data within the framework of meaningful questions about the structure of usage of the language being studies. A somewhat disrespectful term for such an approach is ‘number crunching’. (Aarts 2000:7)

The thesis is both quantitative and qualitative, with emphasis on frequencies and on a detailed analysis of 684 examples, focusing on the meanings conveyed by the Perfect Progressive. These two approaches will hopefully provide information about the use of the Perfect Progressive in Present-day American English. My fear is that there will be too many numbers in this thesis, despite efforts to avoid this. However, since no one has looked at the Perfect Progressive in this way before, some numbers and frequencies are crucial. COCA will be used to provide a quantitative overview of the distribution of the Perfect Progressive, the distribution between genres and the distribution of the Past Perfect Progressive versus the Present Perfect Progressive.

The overall aim of this thesis is to provide a comprehensive overview of the use of the Perfect Progressive in Present-day American English, within the constraints mentioned above. A secondary aim is to shed some light on this grammatical construction which deserves more attention than what it is given in today's textbooks.

Research questions have been formulated and will be answered one by one as a means of forming conclusions and confirming or discarding the hypothesis. The questions are presented in full in Chapter 3, Section 3.3.1. The research questions are not presented until the very end of Chapter 3 because they were not formulated properly until Chapters 2 and 3 were written. However, the questions were somewhat formed even before these chapters were written and the theory and methods in this thesis were chosen with them in mind.

### **Short outline of the chapters**

In Chapter 2, “Theoretical Foundations”, the theoretical background for this thesis will be presented.

Chapter 3, “Method & Material”, is mainly devoted to the Corpus of Contemporary American English, the use of corpora in this type of linguistic research and the methods employed to answer the research questions.

In Chapter 4, “The results from the searches performed in COCA”, the quantitative results are presented and discussed.

In Chapter 5, “The use of the Perfect Progressive”, the qualitative analysis of 684 examples taken from COCA is presented and discussed.

Chapter 6, “Conclusions and Evaluations” sums up the previous chapters and is the chapter in which the outcome of the analysis (from Chapters 4 and 5) is seen in connection with the hypothesis.

## 2 THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

This chapter aims to provide some theoretical background for the issues discussed in this thesis. This theoretical foundation will be used together with the results from COCA to draw conclusions about the use of the Perfect Progressive.

### 2.0 Aspect as a Category of the English Verb Phrase

From a semantic point of view, both tense and aspect relate primarily to time distinctions in the verb phrase. However, whereas **tense** refers primarily to past and present time orientation, **aspect** relates to considerations such as completion of events or states described by a verb (Biber et al. 1999: 460).

A Verb Phrase is “a string of verbs (...). A VP must include a main verb as head” (Dixon 2005:24). In addition to a main verb a verb phrase may include tense, modality and aspect. Aspect is not an obligatory element of the English verb phrase. The term *aspect* “applies to a clearly defined set of verbal markers arranged in a binary system” (Fenn 1987: 23) and it is often used because it has the ability to express something that is impossible to do with the use of modality and tense alone. “Aspect does not tell us anything about *when* the action takes place; it tells us something about whether the action is ongoing or completed” (Dypedahl et al. 2006: 89). (Please note that Aspect does not only refer to the ongoingness or completeness of a situation, its role is far more complex than that and this will hopefully become evident throughout this chapter). Furthermore, “aspect means the signaling of the mode of action by some grammatical device” (Ota 1963: 2).

English is notorious, however, for expressing aspectuality in very many diverse ways which break the barriers between the rigid traditional categories of tense and aspect, lexicon and grammar, syntax and semantics, and aspect and Aktionsart, thus making ‘aspect in English’ a particularly challenging area of research as well as fertile testing ground for comparing and contrasting alternative linguistic theories (Tobin 1993: 3-4).

This ties in well with what was mentioned in the Introduction; Fenn (1987: 23) describes a discussion that has been going on in the linguistic community with regard to the term *aspect* and its use and applicability in the English language. There is also a lack of agreement with regard to the terms used within this field. In the introduction to his book “Aspect”, Bernard Comrie writes that: “in the discussion of aspect, as opposed to many other areas of linguistics, there is no generally accepted terminology” (1976:11). However, there seems to be agreement on the fact

that there are two aspects in the English language; the Progressive Aspect and the Perfect Aspect (cf. Biber et al. 1999: 460). The Progressive Aspect describes “an event or state of affairs which is in progress, or continuing, at the time indicated by the rest of the verb phrase” (Biber et al. 1999:460), and the Perfect Aspect “designates events or states taking place during a period leading up to the specified time” (Biber et al. 1999: 460).

1. I **am waiting** for the cast list to go up right now. (Spoken: 2008)
2. I **have slept** too long. (Fiction: 2008)

Example 1 shows the Progressive Aspect (am waiting) and example 2 shows the Perfect Aspect (have slept). A closer look at more characteristics of these two aspects can be found in Sections 2.1 and 2.2.

Among the various strategies employed in English for expressing aspectuality we have the use of tenses, phrasal verbs, verbal aspectualizers, complement structures, etc. Aspect has almost as many definitions as there are linguists who have attempted to deal with it, particularly those linguists trying to capture the complex subtleties of ‘aspect in English’ (Tobin 1993: 3-4).

In addition, according to Comrie (1976: 62) there is a “tendency to confuse the perfect and the perfective”. The difference between the two is that “the perfect links a present state to a past situation, whether this past situation was an individual event, or a state, or a process not yet completed” (Comrie 1976: 62), and this, he claims, cannot be done by use of the perfective. This claim is one of the reasons why I have chosen to use the *Perfect Aspect* and the *Progressive Aspect* as terms for this thesis, as well as the fact that these terms seem to be used most frequently by linguists and grammarians.

Since the Perfect Progressive Aspect is a “merger” of the Perfect Aspect and the Progressive Aspect, the next few pages will be dedicated to a short overview of these two aspects. The figure below gives an overview of the aspects found in the English language.

	(non-progressive)	Progressive Aspect
(non-perfect)	Simple Present Tense <i>They speak</i>	(ordinary) Present Progressive Tense <i>They are speaking</i>
	Simple Past Tense <i>They spoke</i>	(ordinary) Past Progressive Tense <i>They were speaking</i>
Perfect Aspect	(ordinary) Present Perfect Tense <i>They have spoken</i>	Present Perfect Progressive Tense <i>They have been speaking</i>
	(ordinary) Past Perfect Tense <i>They had spoken</i>	Past Perfect Progressive Tense <i>They had been speaking</i>

**Figure 3**

(Leech 2004: 3)

Figure 3 shows the Perfect Aspect, the Progressive Aspect, the Perfect Progressive and also the simple tenses, in both past and present. “Ordinary” is used to describe the “ordinary” Perfect Aspect or Progressive Aspect, this means that the Perfect Progressive is not regarded as “ordinary” but as complex.

Some linguists and grammarians (e.g. Leech (2004), Thomson & Martinet (1981)) refer to the aspects as tenses, however this thesis will make use of the term “aspect” and not “tense” to refer to the same forms.

## 2.1 The Progressive Aspect

The Progressive Aspect is sometimes referred to by use of terms such as “*durative*’, *temporary*’, *continuous*’, *etc.*” (Leech 2004: 18). However, the term *Progressive* is very often used, and this may be because it “suggests a happening ‘in progress’ and it avoids some misleading associations (...)” (Leech 2004:18).

Tobin writes that “the term **aspect** was originally derived from Russian **vid** (view)” (1993:5). This fits well with how Leech (2004:18) defines the Progressive Aspect when he writes “(...) the Progressive Aspect is said to give us an ‘inside view’ of a happening rather than an ‘outside view’, seeing the happening as a single whole”, (*view* being the operative word here).

To form the Progressive Aspect one needs a form of the grammatical auxiliary “be” plus a main verb ending in –ing. “The verb **be** in its numerous forms is the most common verb in English” and “the most essential role of **be** is as one of the primary auxiliary verbs of English used to express continuous action (...)” (Peters 2004:66). As mentioned earlier, The Progressive Aspect “designates an event or state of affairs which is in progress, or continuing, at the time indicated by the rest of the verb phrase” (Biber et al. 1999:460).

A sentence containing the Progressive Aspect could look like this:

3. John **is running** alongside, waving and calling trying to get Pauline’s attention.  
(Fiction: 1994)
4. Jake **runs** through the school’s hallways. (Fiction: 2002)

Example 3 is written in the Progressive Aspect, whereas example 4 is written in the simple form (present tense) Even though both examples give the reader information about a man and the fact that he is able to run, the verb phrase in the first example adds other possible meanings to the equation. The Progressive Aspect can be used (Thomsen & Martinet 1981:140-141):

- For an action happening now
- For an action happening about this time, but not necessarily at the moment of speaking.
- For a definite arrangement in the near future
- With a point in time to indicate an action which begins before this point and probably continues after it.

These possible uses or meanings are summed up in four short points by Dypedahl et al. (2006:91):

- Process/Activity
- Ongoingness
- (Limited) duration



- Possible incompleteness

The first two points on this list, Process/Activity and Ongoingness, help substantiate the fact that the best name for this aspect is in fact the *Progressive*; something is “going on”, it is in progress.

“It is sometimes supposed that the progressive aspect only occurs with dynamic verbs describing activities and events” (Biber et al. 1999: 471). However, the Progressive Aspect can be used with both static and dynamic verbs and when a static verb is used the meaning is that of a “temporary state” (Biber et al. 1999:471). The most important thing to keep in mind is that the type of verb chosen will have an impact on the meaning conveyed by the sentence. Furthermore, there are even “Anti-Progressive verbs”; these are verbs which are “normally” incompatible with the Progressive (Leech 2004:25).

The Progressive Aspect can combine with the present and the past tense to form the Present Progressive Aspect and the Past Progressive Aspect (distinctions can be made with regard to future, active and passive as well. However, in this short overview it seems sufficient with the Present/Past distinction).

### **2.1.1. The Present Progressive Aspect**

5. I **am waiting** for the cast list to go up right now. (Spoken: 2008)

The Present Progressive Aspect “describes events that are currently in progress or are about to take place in the near future” (Biber et al. 1999: 470). According to Swan (2005: 452) “the Present Progressive can also be used to refer to repeated actions and events, *if* those are just happening around the present”, example: “why is he hitting the dog?”. He continues by saying that it can be used when there is talk of “developments and changes” and also the “future”. This grammatical item can in addition be used “to express a definite future arrangement” (Thomson & Martinet 1981:150).

Example 5 clearly illustrates something which is going on at the moment of speaking; here we have a person who is waiting for something at the present moment, and this is even emphasized by the use of the adverb *now* at the end of the sentence.

### **2.1.2 The Past Progressive Aspect**

6. We **were waiting** downstairs when I realized my error. (Fiction:2008)

While the Present Progressive Aspect “describes events that are currently in progress or are about to take place in the near future” (Biber et al. 1999: 470). The Past Progressive Aspect “describes events that were in progress or about to take place at some earlier time” (Biber et al. 1999: 470). It can express “a sort of future in the past: *He was busy packing for he was leaving that night* (the decision to leave had been made some time previously)” (Thomson & Martinet 1981:150).

Furthermore, the Past Progressive Aspect can be used to “set off one action as a background for another. In these instances the second action is often given in the simple past: *I was painting the floor. Then the phone rang*” (Dypedahl et al. 2006:92).

## 2.2 The Perfect Aspect

7. I **have slept** too long (Fiction: 2008)

This is the other aspect that we find in the English language and it is used to convey meanings that the Progressive Aspect is not able to do. While the Progressive is seen in connection with ongoingness and incompleteness, the Perfect Aspect is “associated with completion” (Dypedahl et al. 2006:89). This view is supported by Biber et al. (1999:460): “the perfect aspect designates events or states taking place during a period leading up to the specified time”.

The Perfect Aspect is made by a form of the grammatical auxiliary “have” and the past participle of the main verb. “Have” is the “second most important verb in English, and like “be” it is both an auxiliary and a full main verb”, and “as an auxiliary verb the prime function of **have** is to express the perfect aspect of compound verbs (...)” (Peters 2004:243).

Following Biber et al. we will discuss the Present Perfect Aspect and the Past Perfect Aspect separately, because their meanings differ in important ways (cf. Biber et al. 1999: 463).

### 2.2.1 The Present Perfect Aspect

It [the Present Perfect Aspect] always implies a strong connection with the present and is chiefly used in conversation, letters, newspapers and television and radio reports (Thomsen & Martinet 1981:152).

8. I can't go dancing because I've **broken** my arm (my own example).

The Present Perfect Aspect is used to “refer to a situation that began sometime in the past and continues up to the present” (Biber et al. 1999: 460). This means that something which has happened or started in the past has relevance in the present time or the future. The example included above clearly illustrates this; here we have a person who has broken his/her arm and as a result of this cannot go dancing. Even though the Present Perfect Aspect is closely related to time it cannot be used with actions whose time is mentioned, e.g. \* I’ve broken my arm yesterday (cf. Thomsen & Martinet 1981: 152).

### 2.2.2 The Past Perfect Aspect

The Past Perfect Aspect has “a straight-forward function - to refer to a time that is earlier than some specified past time” (Biber et al. 1999:460). In connection with this definition the following example was presented:

*“Two brothers told a court yesterday how they watched their terminally-ill mother “fade away” after she was given an injection. Widow Lillian Boyes, 70, **had** earlier **pleaded** with doctors to “finish her off”, Winchester Crown Court heard”.*

As Biber and his colleagues so accurately state; the Past Perfect Aspect is found in contexts where the speaker or writer wants to convey something that happened before the time of reference.

As opposed to the Present Perfect Aspect, the Past Perfect Aspect is not “restricted to actions whose time is not mentioned” (Thomson & Martinet 1981:161). The time something happened can be explicitly mentioned; e.g. the car had been stolen two days ago.

## 2.3 The Perfect Progressive Aspect

“The Perfect Progressive is the most complex verbal form of modern English” (Bègin 2003: 117).

9. I **have been thinking** about you ever since you left us that day. (Fiction: 2009)

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, there are in fact *two* aspects associated with the English verb phrase; the Perfect Aspect and the Progressive Aspect. However, to add some confusion or “spice” to this already complex field of linguistics, one can combine the two aspects and make

the Perfect Progressive Aspect. There may be some controversy involved when referring to the Perfect Progressive as an *aspect*; many grammarians seem to be very careful about that. Biber et al. (1999), for instance, only refer to the Perfect Progressive very briefly under the heading “Complex combinations of aspect and tense” and less than 10 sentences are written about it. The Perfect Aspect and the Progressive Aspect are classified as aspects by most grammarians (some call them tenses, cf. Thomsen & Martinet (1981)), however when it is time to write about the Perfect Progressive, the term *aspect* is left out. However, since the Perfect Progressive Aspect is made up of the same linguistic elements as the Perfect Aspect and Progressive Aspect and is used for chiefly the same purposes, namely to convey meanings that are not covered by tense and modality, it does make sense to refer to the Perfect Progressive as an aspect as well.

Within this grammatical construction “all features of meaning associated with the perfect aspect and the progressive aspect considered separately come into play one way or another” (Leech 2004:48). As the Progressive Aspect and the Perfect Aspect, the Perfect Progressive Aspect has its own meanings which it conveys;

[It] indicates an action that has been in the process for a period of time extending from some time in the past up till the moment of speaking. This is its fundamental meaning, but like the present progressive or past progressive it may have overtones of duration, continuation, incompleteness, simultaneity, vividness of description, or emotion”. (Ota 1963:95)

This “combination of aspectual categories” (Comrie 1976: 62) that the Perfect Progressive represents may seem unnecessary or even conflicting, since the Perfect Aspect is used to indicate completion and the Progressive Aspect to indicate incompleteness. This may be a classic case of “opposites attract”. However, according to Comrie (1976: 61) there is in fact “in the majority of those languages where it is formally possible for the perfect/non-perfect distinction to combine freely with other aspectual distinctions, we find that such combinations do in fact occur”. It is hard to imagine the English language without the ability to express the meanings conveyed by the Perfect Progressive.

The Perfect Progressive is made up by a form of the grammatical auxiliary “have”, the past participle of the grammatical auxiliary “be” and the main verb with the “-ing” ending. In terms of main verb one may choose static or dynamic ones, as long as they end in -ing. However, anti-progressive verbs “do not normally appear with Perfect Progressive” (Leech 2004:49).

The Perfect Progressive can be divided into several sub-categories; distinctions that may result in slight differences in meaning, for instance active, passive and future. The distinction focused on in this thesis is the Past/Present distinction.

10. **Present:** By now, my brain **has been working** overtime, bouncing back and forth.

(Fiction: 2006)

11. **Past:** He wanted to enter the rodeo, and **had been working** at roping and tying calves.

(Fiction: 2007)

### 2.3.1 The Present Perfect Progressive

12. All the years I've **been living**, they're the guys that made America what it is. (Spoken: 2003)

The Present Perfect Progressive is “used for an action which began in the past and is still continuing |———| , or has only just finished |———|“(Thomsen & Martinet 1981:158). The first possible meaning of the Present Perfect Progressive is beautifully illustrated by example 12 (above). Here the subject tells us that there are people who have made America what it is and they have been doing this during the years the subject has been alive, so here we have an action which started in the past and whose effects are still continuing at the present time. Leech (2004) agrees with the above mentioned use of the Present Perfect Progressive, but he also adds other possible functions or meanings;

(...) the main use of the Present Perfect Progressive combines elements ‘continuation up the present’, ‘recent indefinite past’ and ‘resultative past’, found in the use of the non-progressive Present Perfect; and that, in addition, it combines these with the concept of temporariness and possible non-completion associated with the Progressive Aspect” (Leech 2004: 51).

### 2.3.2 The Past Perfect Progressive

13. By January 2007, Shawn Hornbeck **had been living** under the control of his sadistic tormentor for four and a half years. (Spoken: 2008)

One question this thesis takes up is whether or not the Perfect Progressive can be classified as a rare construction. Leech refers to the Past Perfect Progressive as the “rare Past Perfect Progressive” (Leech 2004:51) and he also goes as far as ending his section on the Past Perfect Progressive with these words; “this is all that needs to be said about this tense of infrequent occurrence” (Leech 2004:52). Leech’s view of the Past Perfect Progressive’s distribution is seconded by this quote, “Perfect Progressives are used occasionally in fiction, especially in the past tense (...)”, in Biber et al. (1999: 483). So this shows that several linguists argue that the Past Perfect Progressive is a rare construction, and Biber and his co-authors even claim that the few times it is used it is used in Fiction. A part of this thesis is devoted to investigating if these claims are valid (see section 4.0) However, first we will focus on how the Past Perfect Progressive is used, in terms of its functions and meanings.

“We use the past perfect progressive to talk about actions or situations which had continued up to the past moment we are thinking about or shortly before it” (Swan 2005: 399). Swan continues by saying that “we use a past perfect progressive, not a past progressive, to say how long something had been happening up to a past moment. *We’d been walking since sunrise, and we were hungry.* (NOT ~~*we were walking since sunrise*~~)” (Swan 2005: 400). Example 13 is a good example of the second meaning described by Swan, because the time span (four and a half years) is explicitly stated.

Furthermore, the Past Perfect Progressive is said to be “more general in its meaning than either the Present Perfect Progressive or the ordinary Past Perfect” (Leech 2004:52). What he means by this is that the Past Perfect Progressive “combines the temporariness of the Progressive with the past-in-the past meaning of the Past Perfect” (Leech 2004:52).

## 2.4 The Verbs

In order to form the Perfect Progressive Aspect one must include a main verb in addition to the auxiliaries “have” and “be”. The main verbs chosen for further investigation in this thesis are *work*, *look* and *live*. These verbs were chosen on the basis of preliminary searches performed in COCA, but also on the basis of Beth Levin’s verb categories. These categories are presented in

*English Verb Classes and Alternations: A Preliminary Investigation* (Levin 1993), and have functioned as a means of selecting which verbs to focus on.

During the process of selecting and eliminating verbs, the verb categories had a substantial role. It became clear early in the writing process that the five verbs, *work*, *try*, *wait*, *look* and *live*, which were found in singular and plural form, in past and present and with the contracted forms 've, 's and 'd, would come to play an important part in this thesis. However, only three of them have ended up having a key part in this thesis. This process is more thoroughly described in Section 3.2.2.

It is a well-known fact that a verb can be polysemous, and this is also true for the three verbs which will be looked at in more detail. Since the center of attention of this thesis is not on the verbs alone, but on the verbs used with the Perfect Progressive, their meanings will not be the main focus. However, a few possible meanings have been included below as a form of acknowledging that the verbs may convey different meanings in different settings, regardless of the tense and aspect they are associated with.

### **Work (Working):**

-Engaged in work (especially manual labor); employed.

Example: You have been **working** too hard, Mr. Botts. (Fiction: 2008)

- Functioning or able to function.

Example: But at least the television and the radio seemed to be in **working** order. (Fiction: 2009)

-Something that is good enough as a basis for work, argument, etc. and may be improved later; provisional.

Example: It seems to be **working** okay so far. (Spoken: 1990)

### **Live (Living):**

- alive (especially now).

Example: You were **living**, eating and working with the same people, over and over. (ACAD: 2009)

- used or practiced; active.

Example: I mean, jazz is a **living** language. (Spoken: 1993)

- manner of life.

Example: No, I've been **living** with a yearning desire for too long. (Fiction: 2009)

**Look** (Looking):

- turn one's eyes in a particular direction (in order to see somebody/something).

Example: And in the process of **looking** to the left for traffic, I noticed two white lights come up from behind the red light. (Spoken: 2008)

- act of looking.

Example: I've been **looking** at some houses on the west side. (Fiction: 2009)

- search; inspection.

Example: I've **been looking** all over for you. (Fiction: 2008)

(The different meanings are quoted from Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 1990)

## 2.5 The Genres

*genre* is quite easily used to refer to a distinctive category of discourse of any type, spoken or written, with or without literary aspirations. (Swales 1990:33)

The focus in this thesis is placed on the three genres: *Spoken*, *Fiction* and *Academic Journals* as they are found in COCA. An in-depth look at the size and content of each genre has been included in Section 3.1. The aim of this section is to look at the characteristics and features of each genre in order to find clues as to why the Perfect Progressive may occur more often in one



genre than another. In other words, does one genre have a more “hospitable environment” for the Perfect Progressive than another? Genre is quite a complex area to work with and the term has many different definitions. However, since this thesis is not merely devoted to genre analysis, but to the analysis of a grammatical item, the definition by Swales (above) is sufficient. The terms *genre* and *register* are sometimes used interchangeably; some linguists use both terms, while others employ one and disregard the other (cf. Biber 2006:10).

Linguists as a group have been more partial to the term *genre*. This may be partly due to the traditional tendencies to deal with aspects of language below the level of texts and partly due to the reluctance to employ a ‘term of art’ (Levinso, 1979) so closely associated with literary studies. (Swales 1990:38)

Trying to find relevant material with regard to the Perfect Progressive and its use within different genres has not been the easiest of tasks. As far as I have been able to find out there is hardly anything written on the use of the Perfect Progressive within different genres and one of the reasons for this may be what Levinso (1979) points out in the quote above, that linguists have dealt more with the language below the text level. Nonetheless, some linguists have taken an interest in texts, genres *and* grammar (cf. Biber et al. 1999).

Three of the five genres found in COCA will be studied in this thesis. This selection was made on the basis of preliminary searches performed in COCA with the goal of finding the genres with potential to provide interesting results with regard to the use of the Perfect Progressive. The genres represent spoken (Spoken) and written (Fiction and Academic Journals) language. It could be argued that the distinction between spoken language and written language in COCA is not as clear-cut as one would expect in a corpus, due to the nature of the spoken material:

It would have been impossible, however, to create a corpus that size by tape recording lectures, conversations, etc. The option was to use transcripts of conversations, which were already in electronic form. (Davies, [www.americancorpus.org/help/spoken\\_e.asp](http://www.americancorpus.org/help/spoken_e.asp))

Mark Davies (the compiler of COCA) has chosen to gather the spoken material not by means of tape recorders and transcription, but by downloading “transcripts of unscripted conversation on TV and radio programs” (Davies 2009:161). The authenticity of this spoken language and whether or not it represents spontaneous speech has been questioned. Davies seems to acknowledge the fact that his way of gathering spoken material could be questioned. Nonetheless,

he argues that the “transcripts do represent very well the actual spoken conversation” (Davies, [www.american corpus.org/help/spoken\\_e.asp](http://www.american corpus.org/help/spoken_e.asp)).

Language corpora have predominately been made up of written texts. There are obvious additional difficulties in compiling a corpus of speech, including having to record or transcribe it, and practical problems in representing features of speech as pauses and overlapping turns in conversation. However, spoken corpora have been collected, and studies of these have begun to influence our ideas about grammar of speech and how this is distinct from the grammar of well-formed writing. (Hewings & Hewings 2005:84)

Maybe one of the reasons why the spoken genre in COCA has been the subject of discussion is the fact that it is actually possible, in our day and age, to compile “real” spoken corpora, and that corpus linguists see this as a step in the wrong direction? Or maybe they fear that the language is not representative of spoken language as a whole? Davies argues that the size of COCA and the size of the spoken section makes up for the fact that about 5% is scripted, because 95% is still unscripted, and 95% of 80+ million is a large number of words (cf. Davies, [www.american corpus.org/help/spoken\\_e.asp](http://www.american corpus.org/help/spoken_e.asp)).

The terms ‘spoken language’ and ‘written language’ do not refer merely to different mediums but relate to partially different systems of morphology, syntax, vocabulary, and the organization of texts. (Miller & Weinart 1998: 4-5)

This means that knowing whether or not the texts in COCA’s spoken genre is in fact *spoken* or not is crucial when it comes to making assumptions about spoken language or language as a whole. Whether or not the language represents “non-media” language or is representative of the spoken language of the American population or if it is spontaneous is hard to say. However, I will be working under the assumption that the spoken language found in COCA is in fact spontaneous *spoken* language, albeit in special settings.

As mentioned above, we have three genres, two representing written language and one representing spoken language. The following sections will be devoted to the characteristics of these genres.

### **2.5.1 Academic Journals**

most previous studies of academic language have described the functions of a particular linguistic feature in a particular register. The research goal has been to document the distinctive uses of the target linguistic feature in a particular register, rather than to provide a comprehensive linguistic description of the register. (Biber 2006:13)

This is true for this thesis as well; looking at distinctive features of Academic Journals will be done to the extent it is necessary to answer the research questions. Hewings and Hewings write that “much of the research into the influence of context on grammar has been conducted in relation to Academic writing (2005:118). As far as I can tell very little (or no) research has been done in terms of academic writing *and* the Perfect Progressive.

That the vocabulary and wording used in Academic writing is more formal than for instance works of fiction and oral communication is common knowledge; different rules and conventions apply when writing scientific articles versus short stories. “Writers need to develop appropriate relationships with their readers, presenting themselves and their work in ways deemed acceptable by their fellow academics”(Hewings & Hewings 2005:122). One of the reasons why this genre is deemed more formal than others may be what Hewings & Hewings describe, i.e. that Academic prose is written by academics for academics and this calls for a more formal and scientific language. This form of language is used to add validity to the results and claims they are putting forth.

the genre of the scientific article developed from informative letters that scientists had always written to each other – and still do. Thus, many of the early contributions to the *Transactions*, took the first person description ‘Sir’ at their outset. However, as the *Transactions* and subsequent journals began to assume a role of providing a regular arena for discussion, the new and rhetorical situation that emerged led to the creation of a new genre increasingly distinct. (Swales 1990: 110)

Academic Prose is a broad category, and the Academic Journals genre in COCA is made up of scientific articles found in “nearly 100 different peer-reviewed journals” (Davies 2009:162). This may not be representative of all the different academic prose that can be found. Nevertheless, it is fairly representative of the Scientific Article.

Biber et al. (1999: 458) write that there is a preference for the present tense in Academic language, since this is the tense that seems to give something relevance in the present time: “The present tense is used to convey the idea that these propositions [the propositions presented in the article] are true, regardless of time (...)”. The Perfect Progressive is also known for giving something relevance in the present time, even if it actually happened or started quite some time ago, this is especially true for the Present Perfect Progressive. Thus, we could hypothesize that

the Present Perfect Progressive will occur more than its Past tense counterpart in the Academic Journals genre.

### 2.5.2 Spoken

The spoken language is every bit as highly organized as the written – it couldn't function if it wasn't. But whereas in writing you can cross out all the mistakes and discard the preliminary drafts, leaving only the finished product to the reader, in speaking you cannot do this. (Halliday 2004:13)

In COCA 1/5 is spoken material and 4/5 is written material, this means that the Spoken section in COCA is quite small in comparison to the written sections, however compared to other corpora the Spoken section in COCA is quite large with 83 million words. The Spoken section in COCA is also what one can call a “special” genre, see Section 2.5.

The preference for present tense verbs is particularly strong in conversation and academic prose, but for quite different reasons. In conversation, the reliance on present tense reflects speakers' general focus on the immediate context [...]. (Biber et al. 1999:457)

The texts are taken from TV and radio programs and this should mean that the conversations that are rendered are going on at the present time. So there ought to be a preference for present tense here, as it gives what one says relevance (at the present time). I also propose that there will be a preference for the Present Perfect Progressive in these settings as well, as this construction is used about “‘continuation up to the present’, ‘recent indefinite past’ and ‘resultative past’” (Leech 2004:51).

On the other hand, celebrities are often guests on these types of shows and they are often there to promote their latest CDs and movies, etc. They are telling people about something that happened in the past, but has relevance for the present time, maybe not direct relevance, but relevance nonetheless. This is an argument for people using the Past Perfect Progressive in the types of situations presented in COCA's spoken section.

The Perfect Progressive should be a perfect grammatical construction to use in conversations as it is not so *definite*, as perhaps other constructions are. It does not make that strong a statement, as it may refer to something which is incomplete or is recently finished. It could easily be used as a form of hedging, when one is not completely certain about when something has taken place or if it is completed or not. It represents something which may be incomplete or complete. Another

factor that speaks for the use of the Perfect Progressive in conversation is that “Americans tend to use the progressive in conversation” (Tottie 2002:161), and since the Perfect Progressive is used to convey many of the same meanings as the Progressive it could easily be used in conversation as well.

### 2.5.3 Fiction

The constructions of typical spontaneous speech do not occur in written texts except in the representation of conversation. (Miller & Weinart 1998:2)

Fiction is the genre in which we would find such “representation of conversation” through dialogues in works of fiction like short stories, novels and plays. As mentioned in Section 2.3.1 on the Past Perfect Progressive, the Perfect Progressive is said to be used rarely, however when it is used it is in Fiction and in the Past tense. There is “a strong preference for past tense verbs” (Biber et al. 1999: 456) in Fiction and this may explain why the *Past* Perfect Progressive, and not the Present Perfect Progressive is used; it has to do with tense and not so much the Perfect Progressive.

Fiction writers use past tense very much more frequently than present tense verbs. In fact, many fictional narratives are written entirely in the past tense [...], with present tense verbs being used only in direct speech attributed to fictional characters [...]. (Biber et al. 1999: 458)

The Present Perfect Progressive is expected to be used in fiction, when one encounter dialogue and seldom in other instances (cf. the two quotes included above). One of the reasons why the Present tense is used in conversation and dialogue may be to make the characters seem more real to the readers, so that they will relate to them. Another reason may be to give the story relevance in present time; make the readers feel that they are taking part in the story to a larger extent. Furthermore, when someone tells a story that is more often than not done by use of the past tense, this may be done because what happened in the past still carries some sort of relevance to the present time.

Past tense most commonly refers to past time via some past point of reference, especially in fictional narrative and description, where the use of the past tense is to describe imaginary past happenings as a well-established convention (Biber et al. 1999: 454).

The Past Perfect Progressive is used to “talk about actions or situations which had continued up to the past moment we are thinking about or shortly before it” (Swan 2005:399) and this function of the Perfect Progressive is ideal for use in Fiction, especially in stories and narratives.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This chapter has taken a close look at the theoretical framework that will be used in this thesis. Here we have looked at, among other things, Aspect as a category of the English verb phrase, the possible uses and meanings of the Perfect Progressive and the verbs and genres chosen for further investigation in this thesis. This chapter is meant to function as the theoretical foundation for the thesis. The next chapter, Method & Material, will look at the methods employed to make use of this theory and the material which will be looked at in light of this theory.

# 3 METHOD & MATERIAL

This chapter deals with *what* has been done, *how* it has been done and *why* it has been done. The main part of this chapter is devoted to the Corpus of Contemporary American English and to the methods employed in this thesis.

## 3.0 The use of corpora in this type of linguistic research

A corpus can be defined as a collection of texts assumed to be representative of a given language put together so that it can be used for a linguistic analysis. (Tognini- Bonelli 2001:2)

When one uses corpora to draw conclusions about elements of a language, this may lead to a deeper and more profound understanding of these elements and the language as a whole; “(...) a corpus analysis can help us understand more about the relationship between grammar and context” (Hewings & Hewings 2005: 82). The relationship between grammar and context will play a substantial role in this thesis as the distribution of the Perfect Progressive within three genres is analyzed.

There is some dispute about whether the language found in a corpus is “natural” enough (cf. Tognini-Bonelli) to be used to make generalizations about the given language. However, there is in fact a “consensus that a corpus deals with natural, authentic language” (Tognini-Bonelli 2001:2). There is also some difference in opinion about how language corpora should be used, for instance whether or not raw figures are sufficient or if more statistical methods should be employed. “Many corpus linguists come from a tradition that has provided them with ample background in linguistic theory and the techniques of linguistic description, but little experience in statistics” (Meyer 2002:120). This has led to many linguists being reluctant to using statistical tools in their work, and they have instead based their assumptions on raw figures or statistics made on the basis of simple calculations. Some linguists may have been disinclined to place too much emphasis on the use of statistical tools in linguistic research because they have had too little knowledge of them. In this thesis complex statistical tools will not be used, however quite a lot of numbers and frequencies will be presented, typically as normalized figures but also by use of raw figures.

The greatest amount of work in any corpus study will be devoted to locating the particular construction(s) being studied, and then assigning to these constructions the particular linguistic values being investigated in the study. (Meyer 2002:114)

There are several kinds of corpora to choose from; there are monolingual, multilingual, learner corpora, and many more. The important thing is to choose a corpus which will make it possible to answer the research questions one has formulated and be able to discard or confirm one's hypothesis. For this thesis the choice quickly fell on the monolingual corpus, the Corpus of Contemporary American English. Since the Perfect Progressive is claimed not to be the most frequent grammatical construction in the English language, one needs a large corpus to be able to investigate this construction in a satisfactory manner. In addition to being a very large corpus, 400+ million words, it is very well suited since it contains approximately equal portions of five genres (Spoken, Fiction, Popular Magazines, Newspaper and Academic Journals), and it covers recent material (from 1990-2009) which means that it contains unexplored material.

Corpora are a great asset in language research and there is no doubt that the use of corpora will continue to increase in the years to come. And so it should, because there are many advantages to the use of corpora. For instance, it leaves the researchers with more reliable evidence than for example introspection. Furthermore, the use of corpora is time-saving and fairly inexpensive.

Throughout most of the history of linguistics, [...], there has been no choice. To study text as data meant studying written text; and written text had to serve as the window, not just into written language but into language. Now, thanks to the new technology, things have changed; we might want to say; well, now we can study written texts which will tell us about written language, and we can study spoken texts, which will tell us about spoken language. (Halliday 2004: 12-13)

This means that today's linguists can make more thorough and accurate assumptions about written language, about spoken language and about a language as a whole. Earlier they had to make generalizations based (almost) solely on the basis of written material. The tape recorder is the electronic contraption which has made the spoken language corpora possible, and eager linguists willing to transcribe them and make them available, of course (cf. Halliday 2004:12). As mentioned above, size was a factor when choosing COCA for this thesis; however the fact that COCA includes a fair amount of spoken material was also a decisive factor. The spoken material



in COCA is not gathered by use of a tape recorder *and* transcription, but by the use of “transcripts for unscripted conversation on television and radio programs” (Davies 2009:162). Davies swears to this type of information finding and that it “very accurately“ portrays spontaneous conversation (Davies 2009:162). A fuller discussion of this way of compiling spoken language can be found in Section 2.5.

When using corpora one must acknowledge that there are some drawbacks; the most apparent drawback is perhaps the fact that words may be wrongly tagged (in tagged corpora) or words and sentences may have been duplicated and this will lead to incorrect results. This is a problem that will occur because a corpus consists of large amounts of text and even though the compilers of the corpus try to avoid these types of errors they will occur on a smaller or larger scale. Thus, it is important to be aware of this and not trust the corpus output blindly; one must look at the results with a critical eye. Nevertheless, this problem should not discourage linguists from using corpora, because no matter how one chooses to gather information one will encounter some sort of computer or human errors. However, even with these drawbacks, a corpus is the safest bet for linguistic research of this type of looking at grammatical items. Nonetheless, there is a risk of linguistics becoming too “corpus-restricted” (Johansson – lecture 28.10.09<sup>1</sup>) and one should not forget the value of using some elicitation (and introspection) as well.

### **3.1 The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)**

The corpus used in this thesis is the Corpus of Contemporary American English, often referred to by the abbreviation COCA. This is, as the name suggests, a corpus consisting of contemporary language, from 1990 till present, and it contains more than 400 million words from 160 000 texts. It was chosen for this thesis because it contains a vast number of words, because it is “balanced between spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspaper and academic journals” (Davies 2009:159), because it is user-friendly and easily accessible online ([www.americanacorporus.org](http://www.americanacorporus.org)).

COCA can be used for instance to look at American English diachronically, to compare different word classes or to look at language elements within different genres and also to compare these genres, as is the case in the present thesis. In this corpus the texts are “evenly divided between

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<sup>1</sup> Stig Johansson, lecture at the *Corpus Linguistics Group* .University in Oslo: 28.10.09.

spoken (20%), fiction (20%), popular magazines (20%), newspapers (20%) and academic journals (20%). This composition holds for the corpus overall, as well as for each year in the corpus” (Davies 2009:161). As mentioned above, the texts in COCA belong to five genres; however, the focus of this thesis is on *Spoken*, *Fiction* and *Academic Journals*. A brief description of the material in these three genres is therefore given below.

Spoken (83 million words, August 2009): Transcripts of unscripted conversation from more than 150 different TV and radio programs (example: *All Things Considered* (NPR), *Good Morning America* (ABC), *Today Show* (NBC), *60 Minutes* (CBS), *Hannity and Colmes* (FOX), *Jerry Springer*, *Oprah*, etc.) (Davies 2009: 161).

The authenticity of the language found in this genre has been a source of discussion. Critics argue that the way Davies has chosen to gather the spoken material makes it not representative of spoken language; *spoken* language should be spontaneous not scripted. A more thorough discussion of the authenticity of this genre is found in section 2.5.

Fiction (79 million words, August 2009): Short stories and plays from literary magazines, children’s magazines, popular magazines, first chapters of first edition books 1990- present, and movie scripts (Davies 2009:161).

Academic Journals (79 million words, August 2009): Nearly 100 different peer-reviewed journals. These were selected to cover the entire range of the Library of Congress classification system (e.g. a certain percentage from B (philosophy, psychology, religion), D (world history), K (education), T (technology), etc.) (Davies 2009:162). The main reason for choosing this genre was because of its low frequency of the Perfect Progressive (cf. Figure 1).

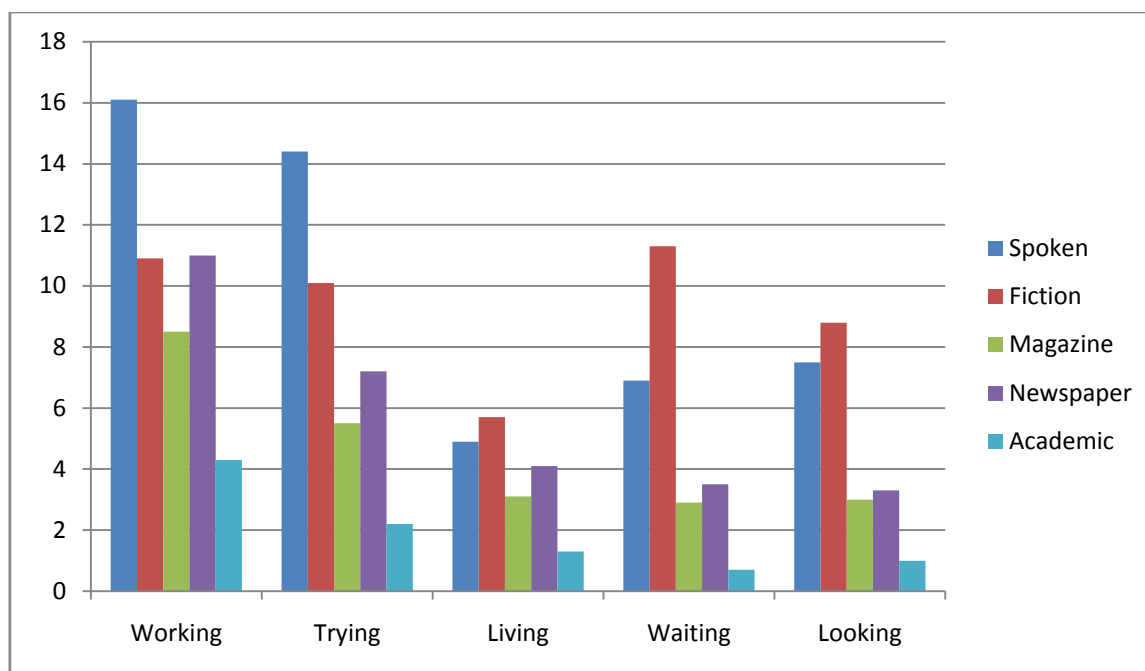
COCA is a large corpus, especially compared to the so-called first generation 1 million-word corpora Brown and LOB (Lancaster – Oslo/Bergen Corpus) and their 1990s counterparts the Freiburg-Brown Corpus (Frown) and the Freiburg-LOB Corpus (FLOB). When working with such large amounts of texts one is bound to come across some errors. Below two examples of such “errors” that can affect the results of a corpus study have been included.

1. **The same example is listed more than once.** When searching with the search string: has/'s been looking (random sample), sample 21 and 22 were the same example: *Juju Chang has been looking into these neighborhood wars and found some pretty shocking examples.*
2. **Something is “missing” in the search word.** The search string [have] [vbn] [vvg] was used in the preliminary searches and it proved quite simple and fruitful. However, [have] includes *have, has, had, 'd* and *'ve*, but not *'s*. Although this is easily spotted additional searches with the search string *'s* [vbn] [vvg] must be performed and the results seen in connection with the results from the first searches.

It can be argued that this last example is not an error; that it is done deliberately since *'s* is so ambiguous in its use, however it must be taken into account because failure to notice this will lead to incorrect results.

### 3.2 Choice of genres and verbs: Restrictions and Limitations

When one starts working on a thesis, it is hard to know exactly what to look for or how to find it. It is therefore helpful to perform some preliminary searches that will function as a “gateway” into the corpus one has chosen to work with. As a starting point for this thesis many such preliminary searches were performed and this will be looked at more closely in section 3.2.2. However, Figure 1 (below) shows the distribution across all five genres of the top five verbs found in COCA which were used in the Past and Present Perfect Progressive and all the abbreviated forms.



**Figure 1.** The results of the preliminary searches, [have] [vbn] working, trying, living, waiting and looking and ‘s [vbn] working, trying, living, waiting and looking, per 1 million words.

As one can see from Table 1, the Perfect Progressive is most frequently found in Spoken and Fiction and seldom found in Academic Journals. Spoken and Fiction alternate between having the highest frequency with each of the five verbs. Why this is the case may be due to many different factors; factors which will be investigated later.

### 3.2.1 The Genres

Corpus studies of grammar in context often compare a particular grammatical feature across two or more collections of language produced in different contexts (Hewings & Hewings 2005:82).

This thesis follows this trend, using three of the genres found in COCA to look at the use of the Perfect Progressive. Spoken, Fiction and Academic Journals represent different types of communication and styles, i.e. they represent different contexts. These three genres were chosen because they represent each end of the spectrum; though Spoken and Fiction are claimed to be quite similar with regard to wording, Academic Journals is quite different. Spoken and Fiction were chosen on the basis of corpus searches which showed that they hold the highest frequency of the Perfect Progressive. Academic Journals, on the other hand, has the lowest frequency. It is difficult to draw the line between genres, however the way in which the corpus is structured –

into broad genre categories, makes one feel confident that the types of texts found in the different genres will portray the genre in an adequate manner. The content of each genre and an account of some of the characteristic features of each genre is found in Sections 2.5 and 3.1.

### 3.2.2 The Verbs

After performing a search in COCA which looked like this: [have] [vbn] [vvg] (results: 100), a list containing the top 100 occurrences of the Perfect Progressive, both past and present and with the contracted forms 'd and 've (not 's, a separate search was conducted and the results added to the results of the first search) was retrieved. Taking a closer look at this list one will see that 40 different verbs made their way into the list. These were (in frequency order): *working, trying, waiting, looking, living, going, thinking, watching, using, making, running, playing, talking, saying, taking, following, sitting, getting, fighting, studying, reading, asking, coming, telling, hearing, seeing, growing, listening, drinking, standing, building, covering, hiding, missing, calling, happening, planning, moving, pushing and selling.*

There were 5 verbs, *working, trying, waiting, looking and living*, that captured my attention and stood out from the rest of the verbs. They were the only verbs on the list that were found in present and past, singular and plural and with the contracted forms 've, 'd and 's. In other words, being the most versatile, all five verbs seemed to have the potential to bring something interesting into the discussion of the Perfect Progressive. However, after careful consideration of the scope and time constraints, it became evident that 5 verbs were too many and working with all of them might take the focus away from the real task at hand; the Perfect Progressive. To find out which verbs to work with I considered them in the context of Beth Levin's (1993) verb categories, to ensure that I had a versatile set of verbs to investigate.

**Table 1.** Shows the five verbs placed in Beth Levin’s verb categories.

Verb and Verb Categories
<i>Work</i> Knead Verbs
<i>Try</i> Amuse Verbs
<i>Wait</i> Exist Verbs
<i>Look</i> Peer Verbs/ Stimulus Subject Perception/ Rummage verbs
<i>Live</i> Gorge Verbs/Lodge Verbs/ Exist Verbs

After using Levin’s model of classification and looking at Table 1 and in connection with Figure 1, the choice fell on three verbs which do not belong to the same categories and that represent different frequencies of occurrence: *work*, *look* and *live*. *Wait* overlaps with *live* as an “Exist verb”, while *try* was discarded because its distribution within the genres was very similar to the distribution of *work*, and *work* had already been chosen. The verbs are in this thesis sometimes referred to by use of their base form and sometimes in *-ing* form. This inconsistent use of terms is due to the fact that it is linguistic tradition to refer to a verb by use of its base form, however since the Perfect Progressive calls for a verb to be in *-ing* form it seems natural to sometimes refer to the verbs by use of this form.

*Working* belongs to the category called “Knead verbs” which is a sub-category of “Verbs of Creation and Transformation. Knead verbs “describe the bringing about of a change in shape in an entity; this transformation can be viewed as a type of creation”, e.g. *I twirled the dough into a pretzel* [I **worked** the dough into a pretzel] (Levin 1993: 176-177).

*Looking* can be put into several verb categories; “Peer verbs”, “Stimulus Subject Perception verbs” and “Rummage verbs”. Peer verbs “do not necessarily describe the apprehension of something via a sense (...)” and “almost all of the verbs in this set take the preposition *at* or one of the locative prepositions as head of their prepositional phrase” (Levin 1993:187), e.g. *We listened to the baby* [We **looked** at the baby]. Stimulus Subject Perception Verbs are intransitive and they “do not take the perceiver as their subject”, e.g. *That pea soup tasted delicious* (Levin

1993:188). The last category, Rummage verbs” is a sub-category of “Verbs of Searching” and “the members of this class show only one of the three possible patterns of argument expression available to verbs of searching, the pattern where both arguments are expressed using prepositional phrases”, e.g. *We rummaged in the drawer for important documents* [We **looked** in the drawer for important documents] (Levin 1993: 199).

*Living* can be placed in three different categories; “Gorge verbs”, “Lodge verbs” and “Exist verbs”. Gorge verbs are used to “describe what one person’s diet consists of , e.g. *Cynthia gorged on peaches* (Levin 1993: 216). Lodge verbs are used “to describe one’s living situation. In the sense intended here they involve protagonist control”, e.g. *Cornelia lodged at Mrs. Parker’s* [Cornelia **lived** at Mrs. Parker’s] (Levin 1993:248-9). Exist verbs “relate to the existence of an entity at some location”, e.g. *An old woman languished in the forest* (Levin 1993:249).

### 3.3 How COCA was used in this thesis

Many searches have been performed in the course of this thesis, but the most important ones have been: [have] [vbn] [vvg] and ’s [vbn] [vvg], where the former represents the lemma HAVE followed by the past participle of *be* followed by the present participle *-ing* form of a lexical verb. Since the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular, present tense, with the contracted form of *has* is not included in the lemma search, it had to be carried out separately (’s [vbn] [vvg]). The searches leave no room for grammatical items in between the elements of the Perfect Progressive (have been \*\*\* working) and no negated forms have been included. These search strings have contributed to finding both the verbs and the genres that this thesis revolves around.

#### The Samples

**Table 2.** Number of samples which will be looked at

	Present	Past	Total
Spoken	156	78	234
Fiction	156	78	234
Academic Journals	143	73	218
<b>Total</b>	<b>455</b>	<b>229</b>	<b><u>684</u></b>

Table 2 shows how many instances which will be analyzed (in Chapter 5). Initially, the plan was to look at the structure or composition of sentences in the Perfect Progressive and the three verbs as one of the major parts of this thesis. However, a quick look at the sentence structure showed that this was not a fruitful field to investigate, see Section 5.1. The motivation for mentioning this here is the fact that this is the reason why there are more examples of the Present Perfect Progressive (455) than the Past Perfect Progressive (229) under investigation. Initially, *have* and *has* were looked at separately, just as *had* was considered alone, because there could be an unexpected difference in composition brought forth by present tense *have* versus *has*. These same groups were used, for the sake of convenience, for the analysis carried out in Chapter 5. It could be argued that there should be an equal amount of past tense and present tense examples; however, since the Past Perfect Progressive will not be compared directly to the Present Perfect Progressive this seems legitimate.

Furthermore, as one can see from Table 2, there are 234 examples from the Spoken and Fiction genres, whereas the total for Academic Journals is 218. Since there were fewer occurrences in Academic Journals I decided to try to sample a similar amount of examples to look at in more detail. I therefore ended up with what I considered to be a manageable amount of examples from Spoken and Fiction, and come as close as possible in numbers to that in Academic Journals. Thus, for the present tense I have sampled 52x3 verbs, amounting to 156 examples in Spoken and Fiction and Xx3 verbs (52 for *work*, 41 for *look* and 49 for *live*) Academic Journals, amounting to 142 examples. For the past tense 26x3 verbs, amounting to 78 examples were sampled for Spoken and Fiction, while Academic Journals includes Xx3 verbs (26 for *work*, 21 for *look* and 26 for *live*) amounting to 73 examples. Since these examples will be used for the qualitative part of the analysis, this discrepancy will not be of any real importance. The samples were gathered in groups of 26; 26 from Have/'ve been looking, 26 from has/'s been working and so on.

To make sure that the material gathered would be representative for the occurrences found in COCA overall, random samples had to be made. To get random samples in COCA one has to conduct the search and then click the button that says "sample: 100" and that will provide random samples. These samples were then copied and transferred into Microsoft Word.



The material will be looked at in terms of many different factors in connection with the genres in which they occur. This in relation to what grammarians have said about the use of the Perfect Progressive and frequency numbers will be used to answer the research questions and in turn to reject or confirm the initial hypothesis presented in the introduction.

### **3.3.1 Hypothesis and Research Questions**

The hypothesis and the research questions are formed on the basis of the theoretical foundations and the methods employed in this thesis. Most of the questions are quantitative in nature and calls for numbers and frequencies as well as theory in order to be answered. Question 4, on the other hand, is a more qualitative question which calls for linguistic analysis of the examples taken from COCA, but numbers and frequencies will be included here as well.

#### **Hypothesis**

There is a difference in the distribution and use of the Perfect Progressive depending on tense and genre.

#### **Research Questions:**

1. What is the overall distribution of the Perfect Progressive in COCA?
  - 1.1 Is the Perfect Progressive a rare construction?
2. What is the distribution of the Perfect Progressive across the genres Spoken, Fiction and Academic Journals?
3. Is there a difference in the distribution of the Past and the Present Perfect Progressive?
4. Is there a difference in how the different meanings of the Perfect Progressive are distributed across the genres?

#### **Concluding Remarks**

This chapter has been devoted to the Corpus of Contemporary American English and the methods employed in this thesis. The methods have been chosen in order to be able to answer the research questions posed.

The next two chapters, chapters 4 and 5, are devoted to the analysis of the material retrieved from COCA. With the hypothesis as a starting point and on the basis of the theoretical foundations presented in Chapter 2, searches have been carried out and these results will be presented and discussed. The “summing up” sections in each of these chapters form the basis for Chapter 6, Conclusions and Evaluations.

## 4 The results from the searches performed in COCA

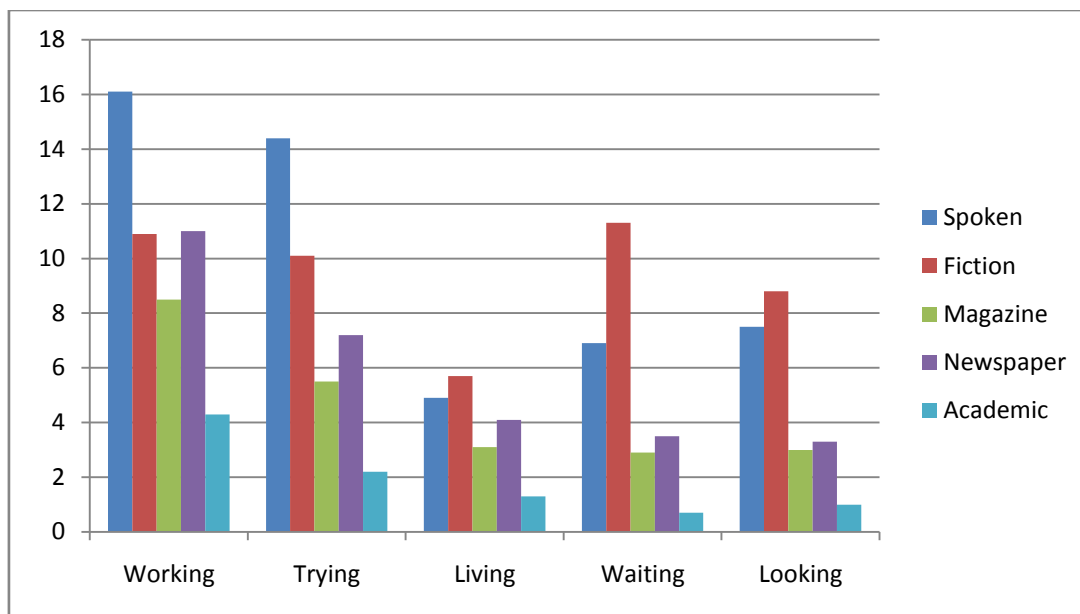
In this chapter the results from the quantitative searches performed in COCA are presented and described. COCA was accessed and the searches were performed between August 2009 and March 2010. Since then Mark Davies has added more text to COCA and this means that some of the numbers here may not correspond to the current numbers and frequencies. However, the differences are not of significant proportions and will not invalidate the results of this thesis.

### 4.0 The results

The search results are divided into three sections according to which research question they are related to. All the numbers are given in normalized frequencies (per 1 million words) if nothing else is explicitly stated. This is done to be able to compare the three genres directly, since Spoken has four million words more than Academic Journals and Fiction (see section 3.1).

#### 1. What is the overall distribution of the Perfect Progressive in COCA?

The total distribution of the Perfect Progressive in COCA amounts to **93 536**, or **233.84** instances per 1 million words. The distribution constitutes **0.023%** of the total amount of words, 400 million. By looking at these numbers we can see that this is not a frequently used grammatical construction, even though the amount per 1 million words does not sound so low. As a comparison the Progressive Aspect, 3<sup>rd</sup> person past tense form, occurs with a frequency of 603 per million words alone. There may be several different reasons for this, however the first thing that comes to mind is that perhaps people do not need or want to express the meanings that the Perfect Progressive can be used to express. Another reason may be that this construction does not offer a stylistic trait that writers/ speakers want to take advantage of. A fuller discussion of the Perfect Progressive's functions and use is offered in Chapter 5.



**Figure 1.** The results of the preliminary searches, [have] [vbn] working, trying, living, waiting and looking and ‘s [vbn] working, trying, living, waiting and looking, per 1 million words.

Figure 1 has already been presented in Chapter 3, Section 3.2. Be that as it may, it is also included here because it gives the overall distribution of the Perfect Progressive in COCA with the 5 verbs that were part of the preliminary investigation. Furthermore, since only three verbs were chosen for this thesis this figure helps validate the results for these three verbs by showing similar results for *wait* and *try*. The figure shows that the occurrence of the Perfect Progressive (Past and Present combined) spans from about 16 instances per 1 million words (*work* in Spoken) to less than 1 instance per 1 million words (*wait* in Academic Journals). Spoken and Fiction are the genres with the highest number of occurrences followed by Magazine, Newspaper and Academic Journals.

### 1.1 Is the Perfect Progressive a rare construction?

This research question was formed on the basis of what Leech (2004:51) wrote about the Past Perfect Progressive, he referred to it as the “rare Past Perfect Progressive”. This view was supported by Biber et al. (1999: 483); “Perfect Progressives are used occasionally in fiction, (...)”. What Biber and his colleagues mean here is that the Perfect Progressive is rarely used and when it is used it is used in works of fiction. These two views on the distribution of the Perfect Progressive brought forth a will to examine if they are valid assumptions. Whether or not the

occurrence is higher or lower in one genre (e.g. Fiction) will be examined in Research Question 2, and looked at even further in Chapter 5.

Research question 1.1 was touched upon in Research Question 1, where the overall distribution was looked at. The overall distribution amounts to 0.023% of the total amount of words in COCA and this must be said to be a small percentage.

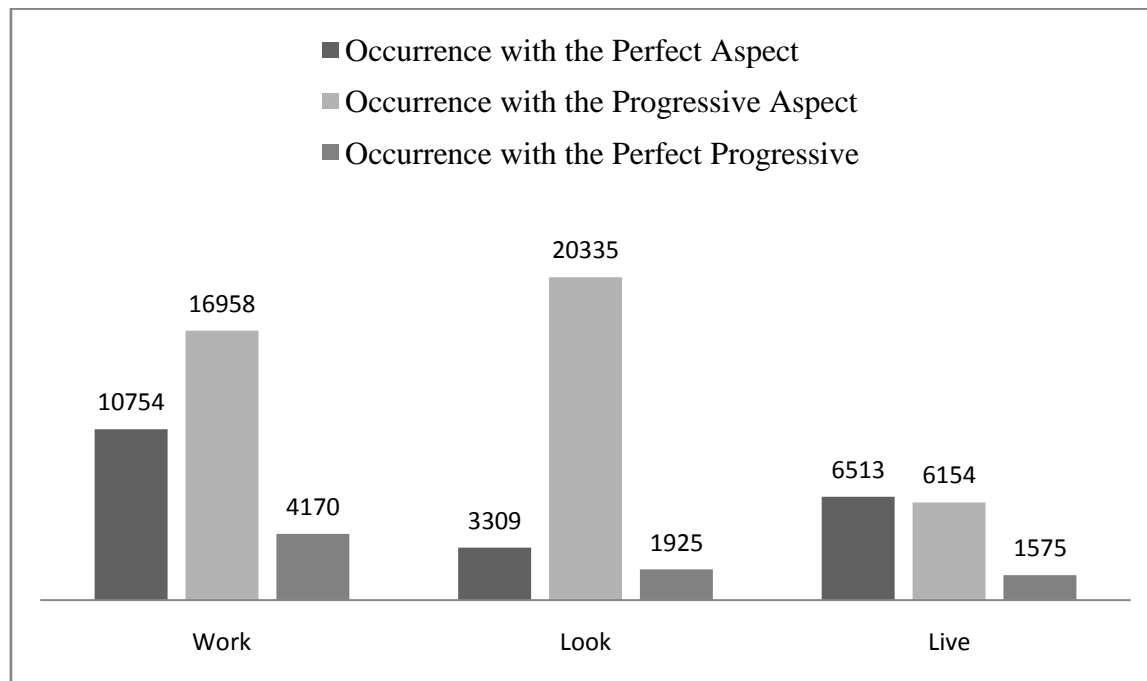
However, to find out if something is rare, one must have something to compare it to. The occurrence of the Perfect Progressive has been compared to the occurrence of the Perfect Aspect and the Progressive Aspect with the three verbs *work*, *live* and *look*. They seemed to be the best grammatical constructions for comparison as they are all dependent upon a grammatical auxiliary and a main verb to function and that makes it possible to compare them on a common ground. Furthermore, they were chosen because the Perfect Aspect and the Progressive Aspect are not seen as rare, at least not in any literature I have come across.

**Table 3.** The total occurrence of each verb in the Perfect Aspect, the Progressive Aspect and the Perfect Progressive (in raw figures) in COCA

Verb	Occurrence in the Perfect Aspect	Occurrence in The Progressive Aspect	Occurrence in The Perfect Progressive
Work*	10 754	16 959	4 170
Look*	3 309	20 335	1 925
Live*	6 513	6 154	1 575
<b>Total</b>	<b>20 576</b>	<b>43 447</b>	<b>7 670</b>

Table 3 gives an overview of the total number of occurrences of *work/look/live* in the Perfect Aspect, the Progressive Aspect and the Perfect Progressive (in both past and present tense forms). The Progressive Aspect is by far the most common construction, at least with these three verbs, followed by the Perfect Aspect, with about half of the occurrences that the Progressive Aspect has. The Perfect Progressive is in third place with less than 1/5 of the occurrences of the Progressive Aspect. Interestingly, there is a marked difference in use between these three verbs and how they combine with aspect, e.g. *look* occurs 3 309 times in the Perfect and over 20 000 in

the Progressive Aspect. To go into more detail with regard to this lies beyond the scope of this thesis.



**Figure 2.** The total occurrence of each verb with the Perfect Aspect, the Progressive Aspect and the Perfect Progressive.

Figure 2 visualizes the numbers in Table 3 and shows that in sentences with any of the three verbs the Perfect Progressive is least frequent by far, the two other aspects in English are much more common. *Looking* is the third most used verb [vvg] in COCA, preceded only by *going* and *trying*, *working* is number 8 on the list. Our last verb, *living*, is the 20<sup>th</sup> most used verb in COCA. By studying these verbs and their total occurrence we can conclude that the Perfect Progressive is indeed a rare construction, especially compared to the two other aspects. The discrepancy is not so marked in all instances, see for instance *Look* with Perfect Aspect and with the Perfect Progressive, nevertheless the discrepancy is more than noticeable and indicates that the Perfect Progressive is a rare construction.

There may be many reasons for these results; however, the most likely reason is that the Progressive Aspect and the Perfect Aspect are more often used because their forms and functions are more preferred or needed by writers/speakers. The Perfect Progressive is maybe seen as more complex and its meanings are maybe not that often called for. Personally, it is hard to imagine the

American English language without the possibilities presented by the Perfect Progressive. On a different note, when looking at these results it is no wonder most linguists or grammarians only talk about *two* aspects in the English language and not three; in terms of frequency the Perfect Progressive is almost non-existing compared to the Perfect Aspect, and especially the Progressive Aspect.

**Table 4.** Raw figures from the search strings *[have] [vbn] working, looking, living* and *'s [vbn] working, looking, living*.

		<b>Present</b>			<b>Past</b>	
<i>Verbs</i>	<i>Has</i>	<i>'s</i>	<i>Have</i>	<i>'ve</i>	<i>Had</i>	<i>'d</i>
<b>Work</b>	968	314	898	945	744	295
<b>Look</b>	222	106	399	571	446	180
<b>Live</b>	261	109	298	266	484	146

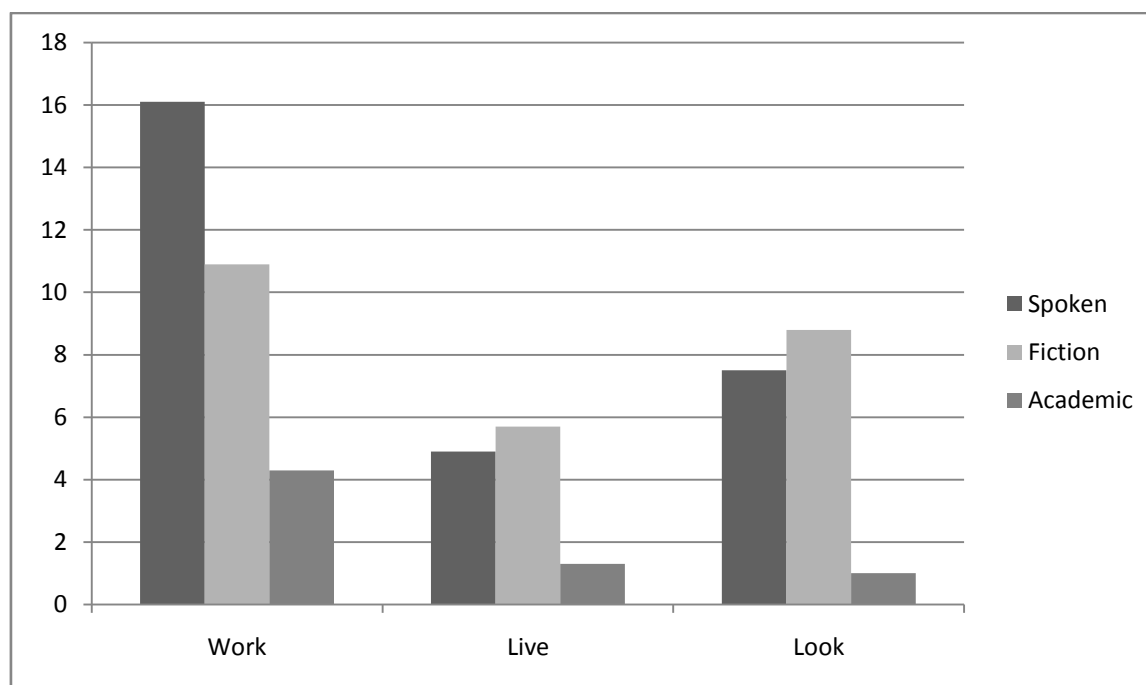
Here the total amount of instances of the Perfect Progressive with each of the verbs is divided to show how the distribution is with regard to the form of *have* with each verb. These numbers were included here for the purpose of showing the actual distribution of each main verb with the Perfect Progressive and its grammatical auxiliary *have* in all its forms. They are raw figures and as we can see *'s been looking* only occurs 106 times in all of COCA, while *Has been working* (968) and *'ve been working* (945) have a wider distribution,

We may conclude, then, with Leech and Biber et al. that; the Past Perfect Progressive is a rare grammatical construction, and so is the Present Perfect Progressive, at least when compared to the Perfect Aspect and the Progressive Aspect and when looking at the three verbs chosen for investigation in this thesis.

## 2. What is the distribution of the Perfect Progressive across the genres Spoken, Fiction and Academic Journals?

This research question was included to see whether and how the use of the Perfect Progressive differs across genres, and also to some extent within the genres.

Figure 4 is based on the same numbers as Figure 1, but only includes the three verbs and three genres under discussion and it is included for the purpose of looking closer at the distribution of the investigated verbs and genres. The numbers are based on the total occurrence in COCA, but they are presented here in normalized frequencies per 1 million words.



**Figure 4.** work, live, look and their distribution in the Perfect Progressive in Spoken, Fiction and Academic Journals.

Work: The number of occurrences (per 1 million words) is highest in Spoken (16.1 instances), then in Fiction (10.9 instances) and lowest in Academic Journals (4.3 instances).

Live: The number of occurrences is a little bit higher in Fiction (5.7 instances) than in Spoken (4.9 instances), and the frequency in Academic Journals (1.3 instances) is the lowest.

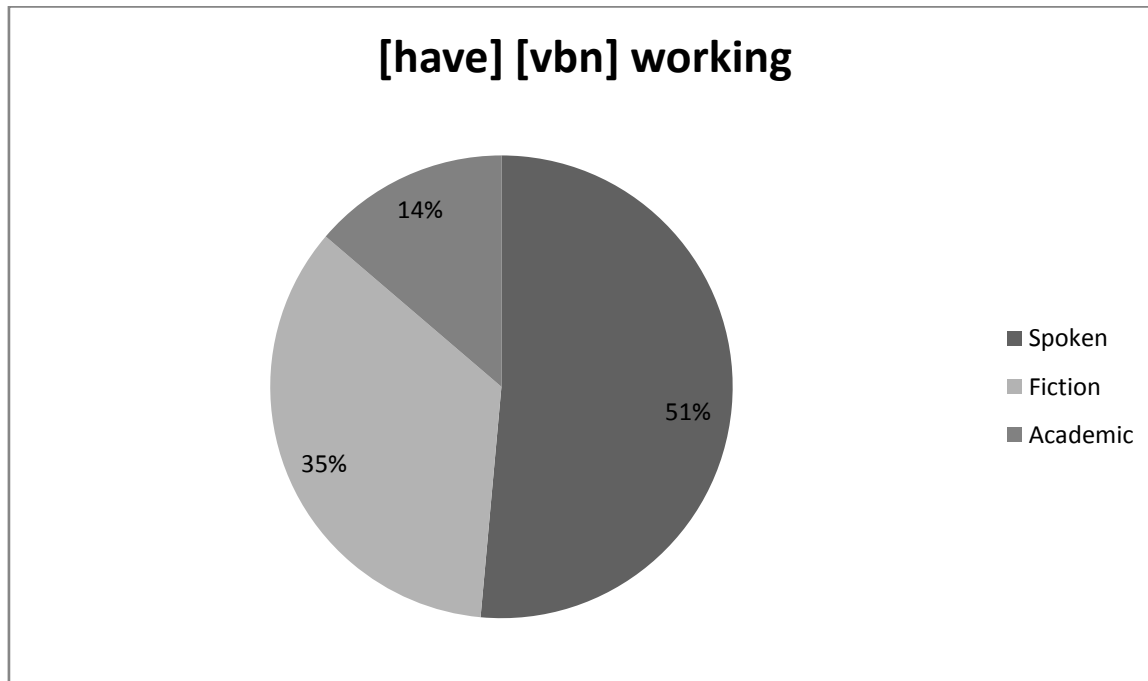
Look: Fiction (8.8 instances) has the highest frequency and Spoken (7.5 instances) is a close second, the frequency in Academic Journals is low with only 1.0 instance.

These numbers show that with both *live* and *look* the distribution is highest in Fiction, and second highest in Spoken; with *work*, on the other hand, the distribution is highest in Spoken and second highest in Fiction. The lowest frequency is found in Academic Journals for all three verbs. *Work* is a more frequently used verb than the other two, but that does not explain the distribution of the Perfect Progressive with this verb nor the difference between the frequencies across the genres.



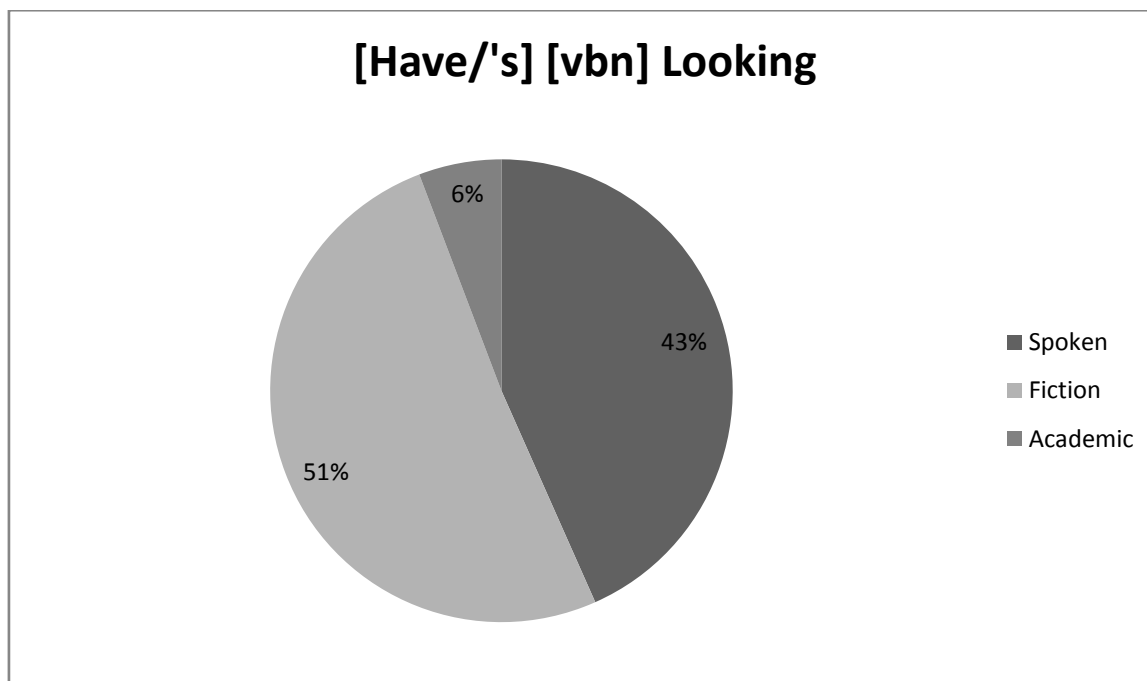
What might explain this discrepancy is the total distribution of each of the verbs in COCA, and this is included in the pie charts below.

The following figures (5, 6 and 7) are pie charts showing the distribution of each of the verbs across the genres. These pie charts are included for the purpose of making it easier to visualize the difference in distribution between the genres for each of the three verbs.



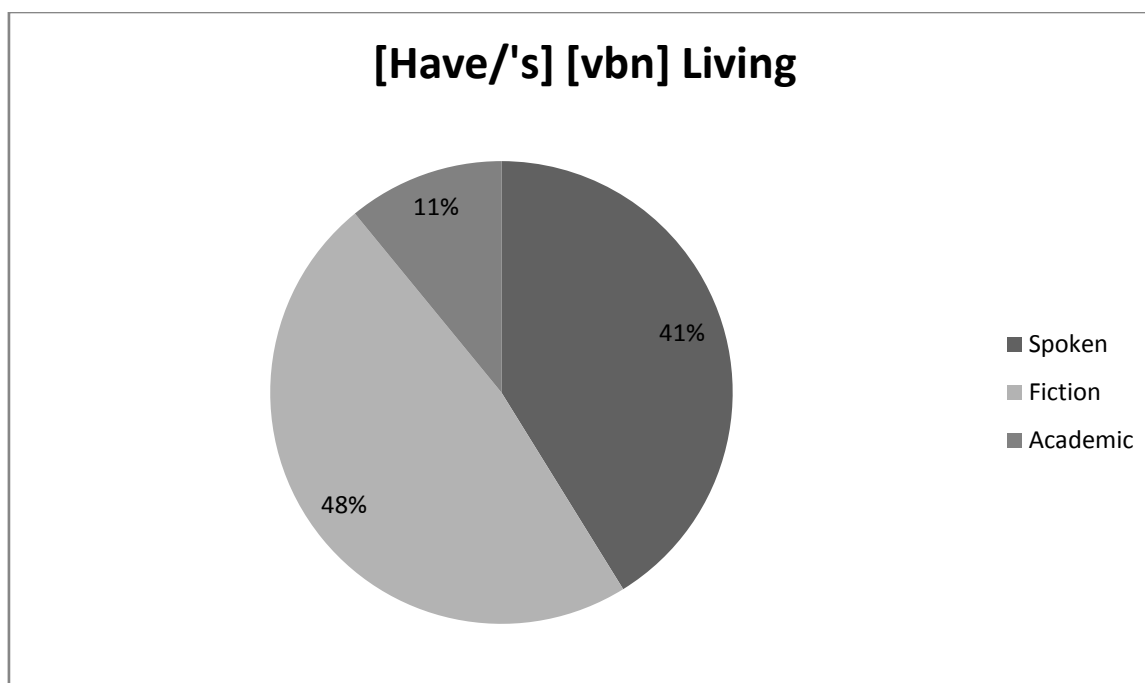
**Figure 5.** The distribution of the Perfect Progressive with working in Spoken, Fiction and Academic Journals.

Sentences with *work* in the Perfect Progressive occur 51% in Spoken, compared to 35% in Fiction and 14% in Academic Journals. These numbers could lead us to believe that there are more instances of the verb *working* (in terms of total distribution [vvg]) in Spoken and Fiction than in Academic Journals and that this would be a main reason for this discrepancy in the results. However, there are actually 17 964 instances of *Working* (total distribution [vvg] in COCA) in Academic Journals, 14 770 instances in Fiction and 24 895 in Spoken. That Spoken has the largest percentage is perhaps not surprising, however that Academic Journals has such a small percentage clearly shows us that the aspect Perfect Progressive is responsible for its low results, and not so much the distribution of the main verb.



**Figure 6.** The distribution of the Perfect Progressive with looking in Spoken, Fiction and Academic Journals.

The distribution of *look* in the Perfect Progressive is highest in Fiction with 51% and 43 % in Spoken, the distribution in Academic Journals only amounts to 6 %. The distribution of the Perfect Progressive with *working* and the total distribution of *working* in COCA showed us that it is likely that the Perfect Progressive itself is an influential factor for the distribution within the genres and not so much emphasis should be placed on the main verb, even though the verb is important, especially in terms of meaning. The distribution of the Perfect Progressive with *looking*, on the other hand, shows a different result as the total distribution of the verb is much higher in Fiction (41 873 instances) than in Spoken (30 687) and Academic Journals (7091). These results contradict the notion that the verb itself is not an important reason for the distribution of the Perfect Progressive within the genres. So, we have one verb speaking for this supposition and one against it. Let us now take a look at *living*.



**Figure 7.** The distribution of the Perfect Progressive with living in Spoken, Fiction and Academic Journals.

In Figure 7 we see that sentences with *live* in the Perfect Progressive have a distribution of 48% in Fiction, 41 % in Spoken and 11% in Academic Journals. The total distribution of this verb in *-ing* form in COCA is 20 157 instances in Fiction, 13 677 in Spoken and 14 252 in Academic Journals. This suggests that the distribution of the Perfect Progressive within the genres has to do with the Perfect Progressive and not so much with the main verb.

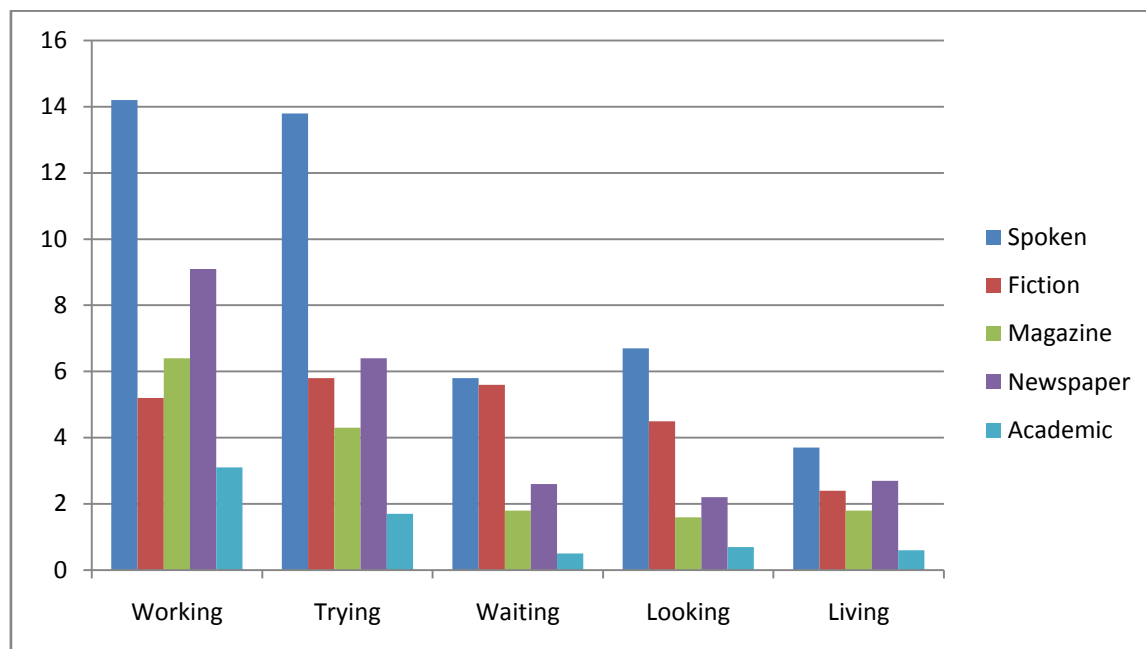
All three figures seen together show us that with *work* the frequency is highest in Spoken, but with both *look* and *live* the frequency is higher in Fiction. The difference in distribution between Spoken and Fiction is quite small with all three verbs; with Academic Journals, on the other hand, the frequency is very low. The discrepancy with regard to the distribution in Academic Journals is prevalent with all three verbs, and this may be due to the fact that these particular verbs are not so often used in Academic prose. However, after a quick look at the “top 100” verbs in the *-ing* form in Academic Journals this assumption can be discarded as we see that *working* is the 3<sup>rd</sup> most used word in the Academic Journals genre, *looking* is in 13<sup>th</sup> place and *living* in 15<sup>th</sup>. In Fiction *looking* is in 2<sup>nd</sup> place, *working* in 16<sup>th</sup> and *living* is 35<sup>th</sup> on the list. In Spoken *living* in 7<sup>th</sup> place, *working* in 9<sup>th</sup> and *living* is at 26<sup>th</sup>. This shows that the reasons for this discrepancy must be because of the Perfect Progressive itself and that there is in fact a difference in the distribution

of the Perfect Progressive with regard to genre, and regardless of verb distribution. This assumption was confirmed by *working* and *living*, but proved somewhat wrong by *looking*. However, the overall tendency must be said to be that the Perfect Progressive is an important factor for the distribution within the genres.

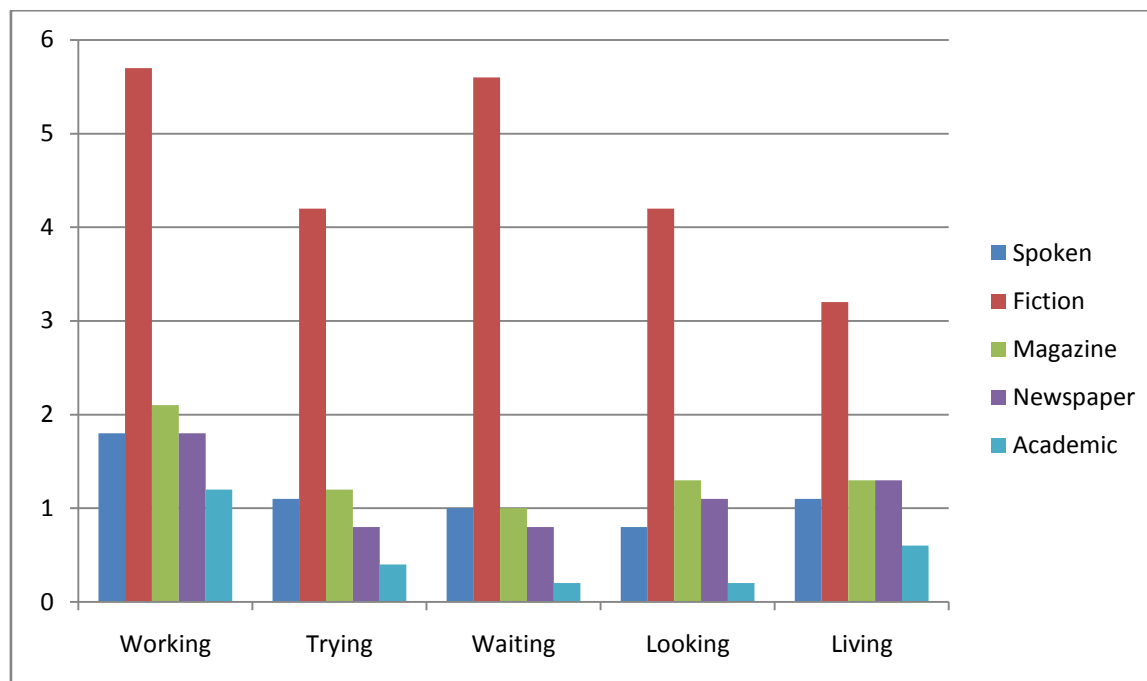
### 3. Is there a difference in the distribution of the Past and the Present Perfect Progressive?

This question deals with the distribution of the Perfect Progressive with regard to tense. It was formed on the basis of the theoretical foundations in chapter 2 and the preliminary searches performed. As with several of the other research questions it is rooted in what Biber et al. (1999) and Leech (2004) have written about the distribution of the Perfect Progressive, and especially what they have written about the Past Perfect Progressive (see Chapter 2).

The two figures below, Figure 1.1 and 1.2, are made on the basis of the same numbers as Figure 1, however the numbers have been divided to show the frequency of the Present Perfect Progressive versus the Past Perfect Progressive.



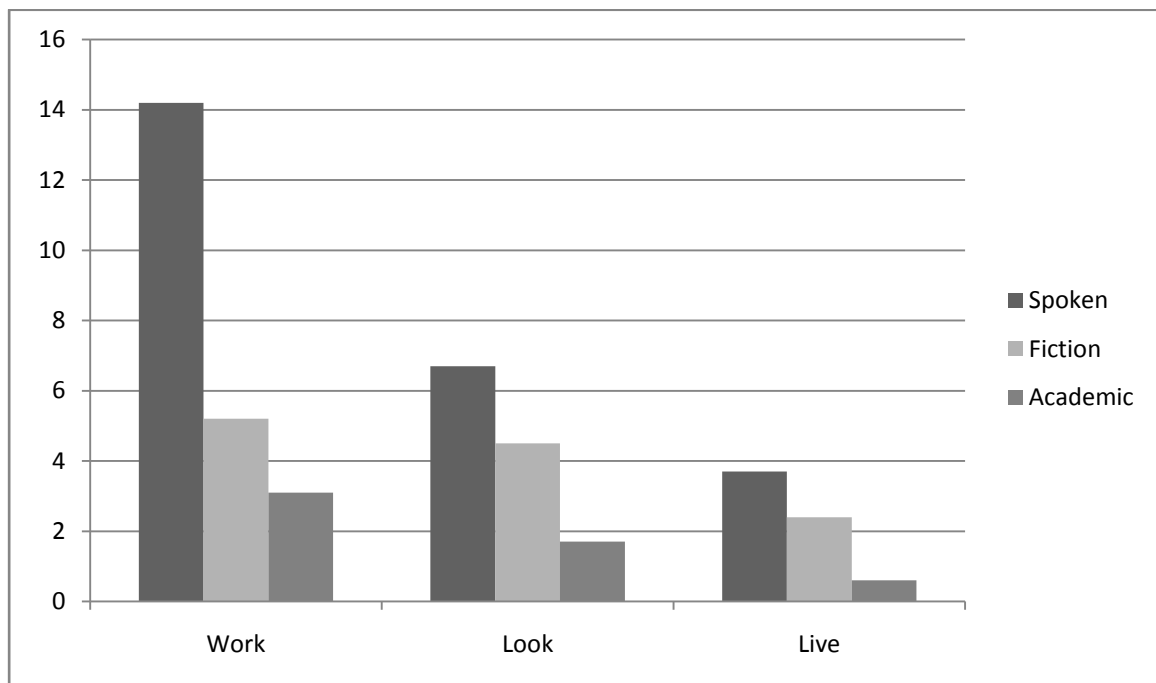
**Figure 1.1.** The result of the preliminary searches; have/'ve/has/'s [vbn] working, trying, living, waiting and looking in all the genres in COCA.



**Figure 1.2.** The results of the preliminary searches; had/'d [vbn] working, trying, living, waiting and looking in all the genres in COCA.

Figure 1.1 shows the distribution of the Present Perfect Progressive with five verbs and all the genres in COCA, and Figure 1.2 does the same for the Past Perfect Progressive. Even though this thesis mainly focuses on *work*, *live* and *look* in Spoken, Fiction and Academic Journals, Figure 1.1 and 1.2 are included here because they illustrate even more clearly that there is a difference in distribution between the Present Perfect Progressive and the Past Perfect Progressive between verbs and genres. Another reason for including them is to validate the results of the three verbs chosen for this thesis. The figures show the same tendencies for use of the Present Perfect Progressive versus the Past Perfect Progressive for the three verbs chosen for this thesis and the two verbs *wait* and *try* which were only considered initially. The tendencies are that the Present Perfect Progressive is used most frequently in Spoken, whereas the Past Perfect Progressive is used most frequently in Fiction. The fact that this is the tendency for all of these five verbs (although for *wait* in the Present Perfect Progressive we see a close race for between Spoken and Fiction) made me want to take a closer look at this.

As mentioned in Section 2.3.2, there is a notion among grammarians that the Perfect Progressive is a rare construction, Biber et al. (1999: 483) suggest that the few times the Perfect Progressive is used it is used in Fiction and in the Past tense. This means that Fiction should be given a bit more emphasis than the other two genres. Why is it that the Past Perfect Progressive in Fiction more likely to occur than the Past Perfect Progressive in Academic Journals or the Past Perfect Progressive in Spoken? The fact that there is a “strong preference for past tense verbs” (Biber et al. 1999: 456) in fiction may explain why the Past Perfect Progressive is used more than the Present Perfect Progressive. The fact that present tense verbs are preferred in Spoken (especially in conversation) is confirmed by the preferred use of the Present Perfect Progressive in Spoken.



**Figure 4.1.** Work, live, look and their distribution with the Present Perfect Progressive in Spoken, Fiction and Academic Journals.

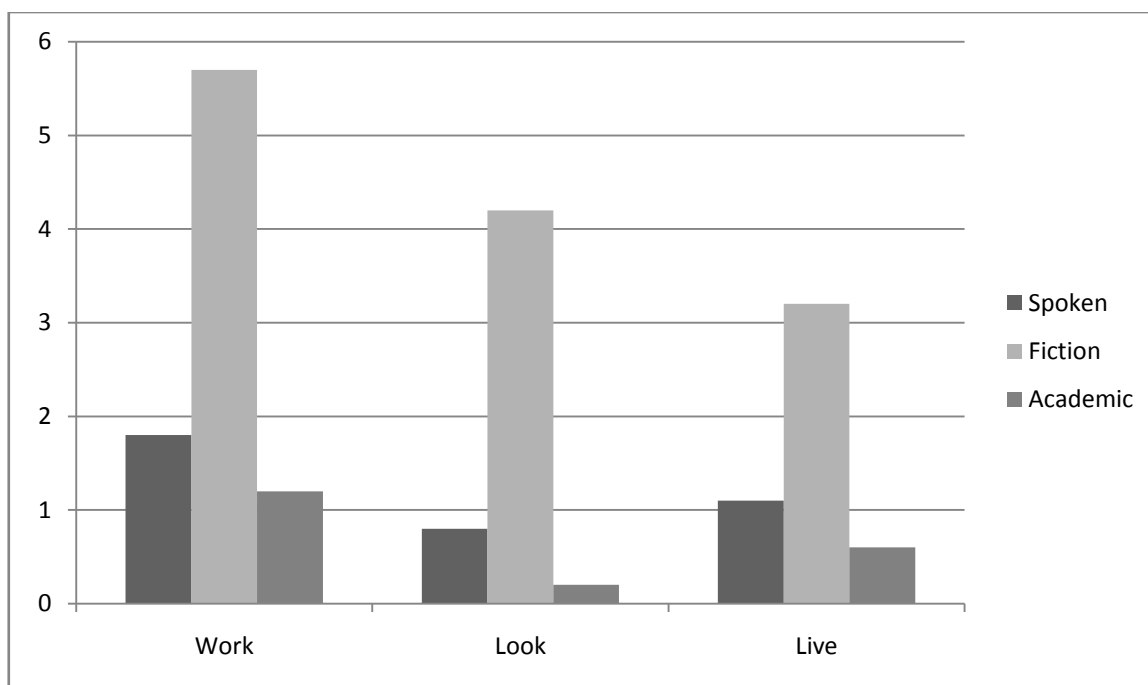


Figure 4.2. Work, look, live and their distribution with the Past Perfect Progressive in Spoken, Fiction and Academic Journals.

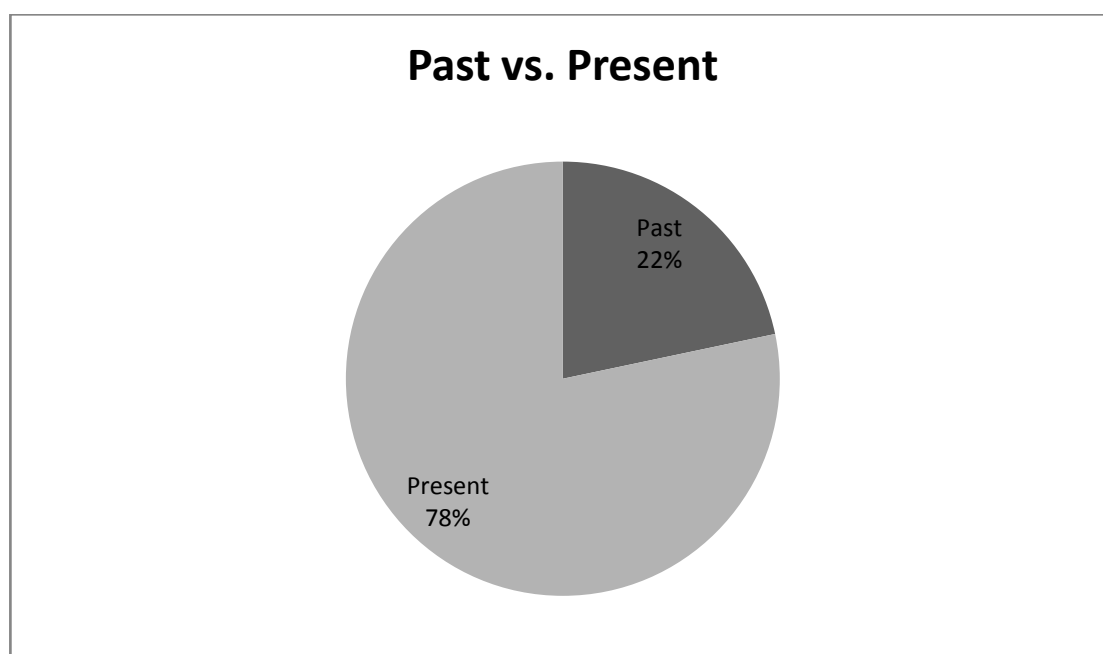
Figures 4.1 and 4.2 show the distribution of the Present Perfect Progressive (4.1) and the Past Perfect Progressive (4.2) with *work*, *look* and *live* in the three genres. Figure 4.1 shows that the number of occurrences per 1 million words is highest in Spoken with 14.2 instances with *work*, 6.7 with *look* and 3.7 with *live*, the genre with the second highest frequency is found in Fiction, however here the numbers are much smaller. In Table 4.2 the frequency is highest in Fiction with all the verbs. Tables 4.2 (and 1.2) corroborates Biber et al. (1999)’s claim about the Past Perfect Progressive being used in Fiction.

As mentioned earlier in the present thesis, preliminary searches were performed in order to find which verbs and genres to work with. One of these searches looked at the Top 100 occurrences of the Perfect Progressive. Below these instances have been divided into the Past Perfect Progressive and the Present Perfect Progressive to see how the division is within COCA overall.

**Table 5.** The results of Top 100 [have] [vbn] [vvg] and ‘s [vbn] [vvg], divided into the Past Perfect Progressive and the Present Perfect Progressive.

<b>Past</b> (‘d and had)	<b>7563</b>
<b>Present</b> (have, ‘ve, has, ‘s)	<b>27298</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>34 861</b>

Table 5 shows the difference in distribution between the Present Perfect Progressive and the Past Perfect Progressive in the Top 100 results in all the five genres in COCA. It shows that out of 34 861 instances only 7563 (22%) of them are Past Perfect Progressives.

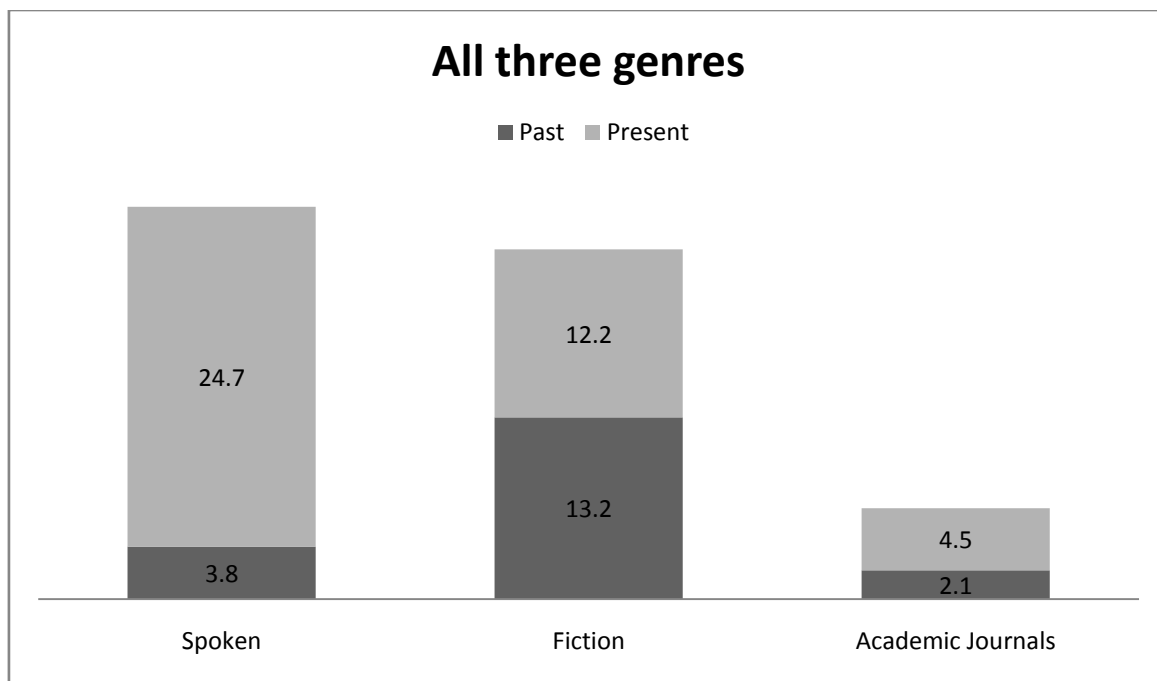


**Figure 8.** The results of Top 100 [have] [vbn] [vvg] and ‘s [vbn] [vvg], divided into the Past Perfect Progressive and the Present Perfect Progressive.

Figure 8 depicts that the Present Perfect Progressive is the preferred form overall, at least when it comes to the Top 100 in COCA.

The next two Figures show the distribution of the Past Perfect Progressive and the Present Perfect Progressive within the three genres that are discussed in more detail in this thesis.





**Figure 9.** The distribution (per 1 million words) of the Past Perfect Progressive and the Present Perfect Progressive within Spoken, Fiction and Academic Journals.

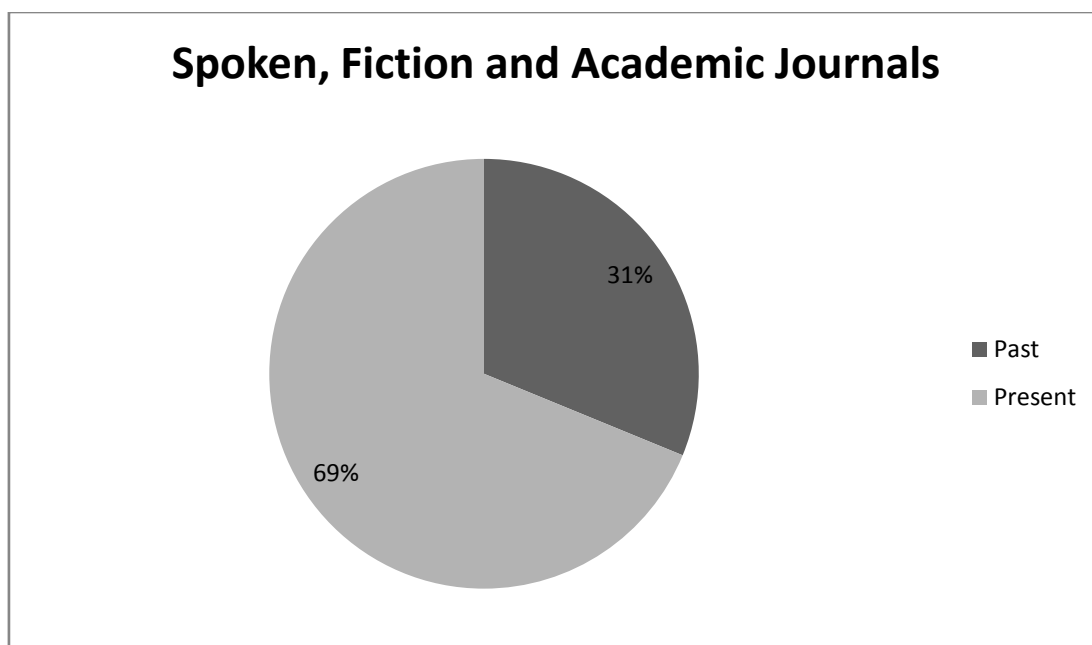
Figure 9 shows the distribution per 1 million words for *work*, *live* and *look* together in the Past Perfect Progressive and the Present Perfect Progressive within each genre. The numbers show us that the distribution of the Present Perfect Progressive is more frequent than the Past Perfect Progressive in Spoken and Academic Journals. The Past Perfect Progressive is most frequently used in Fiction only; however, this is the genre with the lowest discrepancy between the distribution of the Present and Past Perfect Progressive. There is a larger difference especially in the Spoken material, but also in Academic Journals where the Present Perfect Progressive is the most frequently used construction.

The raw figures show the same trend;

Spoken: Present (2054) and Past (319)

Fiction: Present (969) and Past (1047)

Academic Journals: Present (360) and Past (168)

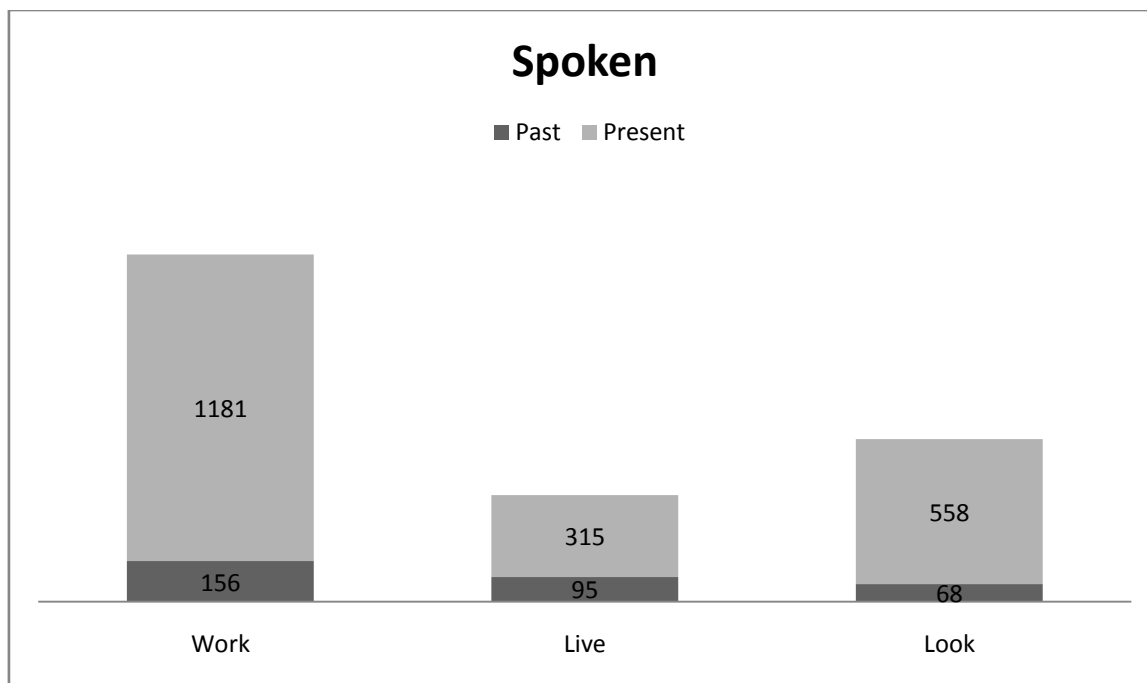


**Figure 10.** All instances of the Past Perfect Progressive and the Present Perfect Progressive with Work, Live and Look in Spoken, Fiction and Academic Journals.

As the pie chart (Figure 10) illustrates the Present Perfect Progressive is much more frequent than the Past Perfect Progressive is with our three verbs. The pie chart does not give a completely accurate picture of the distribution within all three genres, since the distribution of the Past Perfect Progressive is higher than the distribution of the Present Perfect in Fiction (cf. Figure 9). Nevertheless, it does show the overall distribution in an adequate manner; the Present Perfect Progressive is the preferred construction.

Compared to the overall distribution for the Past versus the Present Perfect Progressive in the whole of COCA, the discrepancy is slightly less; cf. Figure 8 versus Figure 10. In Figure 8 the numbers are 78% for the Present and 22% for the Past, and in Figure 10 the numbers are 69% for the Present and 31% for the Past. We can only speculate why this is so, but it could have to do with the verbs chosen for investigation in this thesis versus the verbs represented in the whole of COCA, and also the genres chosen in this thesis versus the two genres that were left out.

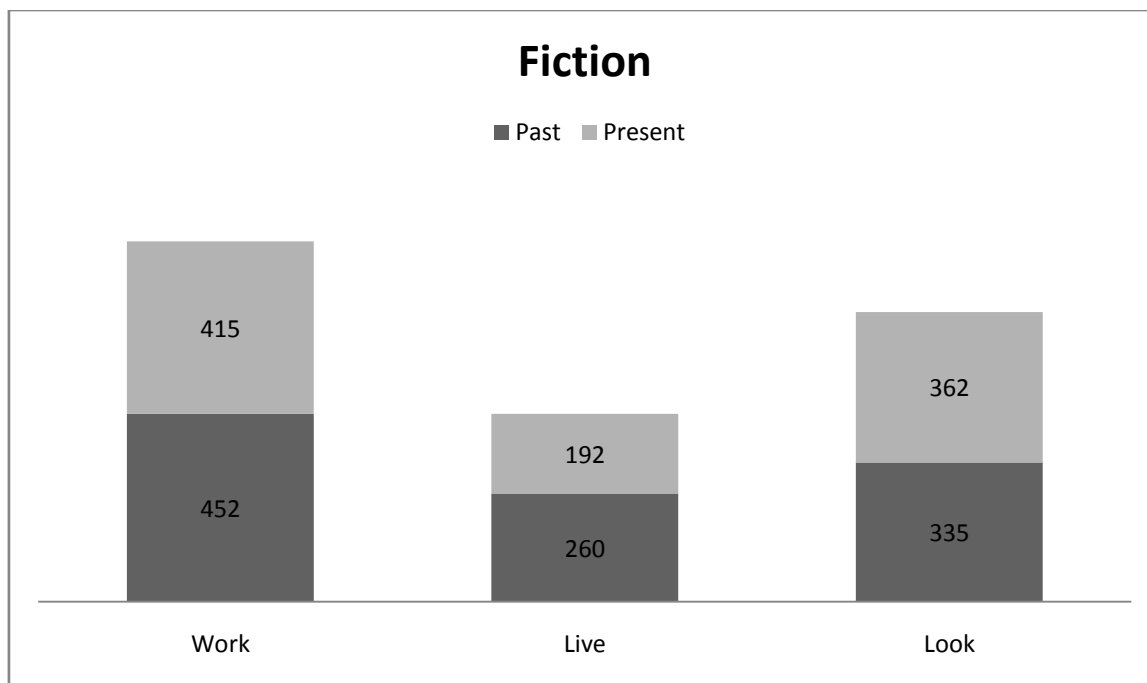
Figures 11, 12 and 13 show the distribution of the Past versus Present Perfect Progressive with each of the three verbs in each of the three genres. The numbers used to make these figures are taken directly from COCA (raw figures), since they compare the distribution within the genres and not the distribution between genres.



**Figure 11.** The distribution of the Past Perfect Progressive and the Present Perfect Progressive with the three verbs in the Spoken genre.

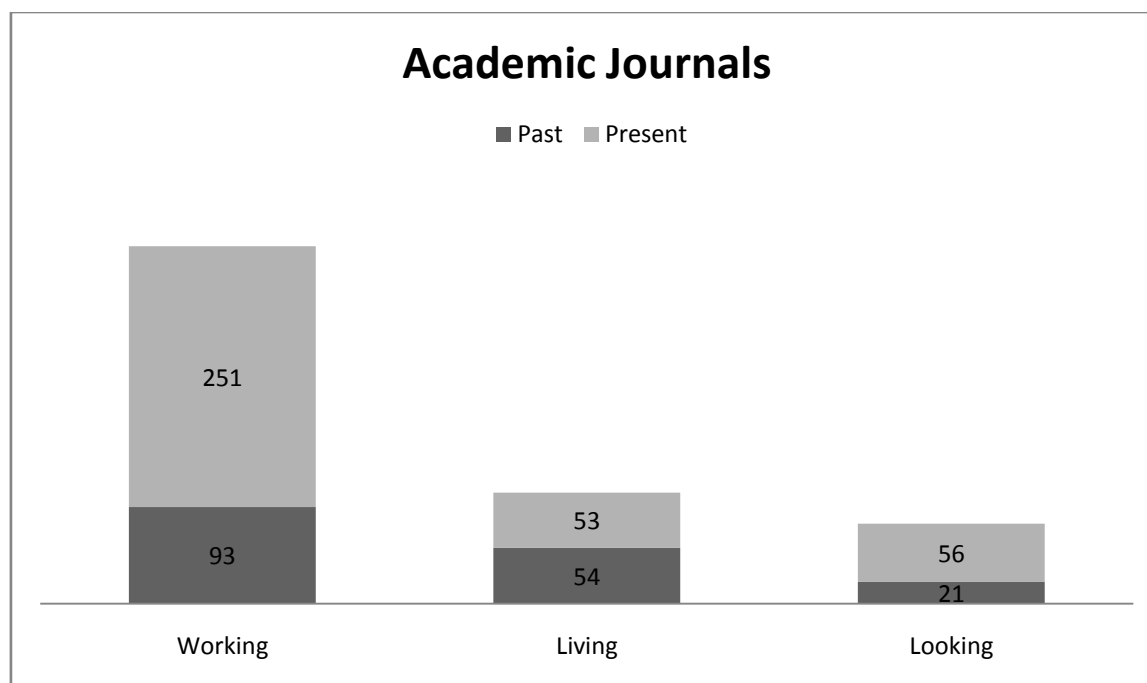
Figure 11 confirms what was seen in Figure 9, that the distribution of the Present Perfect Progressive surpasses the distribution of the Past Perfect Progressive within the Spoken genre in COCA. It is interesting to see that there is a slight discrepancy between the verbs; however they all clearly show this tendency.

The biggest difference is seen in sentences with *work*; the Present Perfect Progressive occurs 1181 times while there are 156 instances of the Past Perfect Progressive and *work*. The difference between Past and Present is not as distinct with *live* and *look*, however the divergence is higher with *look* than *live*.



**Figure 12.** The distribution of the Past Perfect Progressive and the Present Perfect Progressive with the three verbs in Fiction.

In Fiction the Past Perfect Progressive is the “winner” and its use with all three verbs surpasses the use of the Present Perfect Progressive. The discrepancies are not as striking as in Spoken. But they do show that the Past Perfect Progressive is used most frequently with all three verbs and this is the opposite of the results in the Spoken genre. This confirms what Biber et al. (1999) writes about the use of the Perfect Progressive and its use in works of Fiction (cf. Figures 1.2, 4.2 and 9).



**Figure 13.** The distribution of the Past Perfect Progressive and the Present Perfect Progressive within the three verbs in Academic Journals.

Within Academic Journals the Present Perfect Progressive is the predominant form, except with *live*, where there is actually one more instance of the Past Perfect Progressive. The discrepancy is not as obvious within Academic Journals as it is within the Spoken genre. However, the main tendency is that there is a preference for the use of the Present Perfect Progressive among writers of articles included in the “peer-reviewed” Academic Journals in COCA.

## 4.2 Summing up

This section sums up the main results found when answering the quantitative research questions posed in this thesis.

1. What is the overall distribution of the Perfect Progressive in COCA?

The overall distribution is low with 0.023% of the total amount of words in COCA.

- 1.1 Is the Perfect Progressive a rare construction?

The answer to this question based on the investigation carried out in this thesis is: yes. The Perfect Progressive is a rare construction. This can be claimed when looking at the overall

distribution in COCA and the distribution of the Perfect Progressive compared to the distribution of the Perfect Aspect and the Progressive Aspect.

2. What is the distribution of the Perfect Progressive across the genres Spoken, Fiction and Academic Journals?

There is a difference in distribution of the Perfect Progressive across the genres. The frequency is highest in Spoken with *work*, in Fiction with *live* and *look*. The distribution is lowest in Academic Journals with all three verbs. Another important thing found when working with this research question is that it is the choice of aspect (i.e. the Perfect Progressive) that seems to be important rather than the distribution of the main verb. This may explain the distribution observed in this research question. This is only a tendency spotted with both *work* and *live*, however the results with *look* could be used as an argument for placing more emphasis on the distribution of the main verb with regard to the distribution of the Perfect Progressive within genres.

3. Is there a difference in the distribution of the Past and the Present Perfect Progressive?

There is a marked difference in the distribution of the Past Perfect Progressive and the Present Perfect Progressive when looking at the distribution within Spoken, Fiction and Academic Journals (as well as Newspapers and Magazines). The Present Perfect Progressive occurs with the highest frequency in Spoken with all the verbs and the Past Perfect Progressive occurs with the highest frequency in Fiction. The results for the Past Perfect Progressive are very noticeable as the frequency here is much higher than what we find in the other genres (cf. Figure 1.2, 4.2 and 9). This confirms what Biber et al. (1999) said about Fiction and the Past Perfect Progressive. The high distribution of the Present Perfect Progressive in Spoken may be explained by the fact that there is a preference for present tense verbs in general in this genre, especially in conversations (cf. Biber et al. 1999: 457).

Within COCA there is an overall preference for the Present Perfect Progressive, and looking at the Top 100 results we see that the Past Perfect Progressive only amounts to 22%, whereas the Present Perfect Progressive amounts to 78%. The same tendency is seen when looking at only the three genres and the three verbs investigated in this thesis, here the Present Perfect Progressive has the majority of occurrences with 69%.

Taking a closer look at each genre we see that within Spoken there is a preference for the Present Perfect Progressive, the same tendency is seen in Academic Journals, however not on the same scale. In Fiction there is a preference for the Past Perfect Progressive, albeit not overwhelming.

In conclusion, there is a difference in the distribution of the Past and the Present Perfect Progressive, thus the Perfect Progressive's distribution is dependent on tense.

# 5 The use of the Perfect Progressive

Here we will be looking at the use of the Perfect Progressive. By *use* is meant the meanings the Perfect Progressive can convey and in what contexts these are used. This section revolves around the last research question, number 4; *Is there a difference in how the different meanings of the Perfect Progressive are distributed across the genres?* i.e. is the meaning the Perfect Progressive conveys in any way connected to genre? The previous research questions dealt with in chapter 4 are of a more quantitative nature. Number 4, on the other hand, calls for a qualitative analysis.

To answer this research question one must take a closer look at the 684 examples taken from COCA (see Table 2). This is done to see for what purpose the Perfect Progressive is used in each sentence; which of the possible meanings attributed to the Perfect Progressive is used? And does the context play a role for the interpreting of the Perfect Progressive's intended meaning?

There are four possible meanings typically associated with the Perfect Progressive, two with the Past Perfect Progressive and two with the Present Perfect Progressive. The meanings of the Perfect Progressive were described in Section 2.3, and they are repeated below for convenience. The meanings have been given numbers from 1 to 4 and these numbers will be used throughout the rest of the thesis when referring to these meanings.

## Meanings of the Perfect Progressive:

- The Present Perfect Progressive

1. *Actions, events or situations which began in the past and are still continuing.*

Example: But Rob, you've **been working** in this business for a while. (Spoken: 2008)

2. *Actions, events or situations that have only just finished.*

Example: The thing Nikolai **has been working** for has finally happened. (Fiction: 2007)

- The Past Perfect Progressive

3. *Actions, events or situations which had continued up to the past moment we are thinking about or shortly before it.*



Example: This bald-faced death threat was just the opportunity the cops **had been looking** for to show that they could handle a few uppity Chinese. (Fiction: 2006)

4. *Used to say how long something had been happening up to a past moment.*

Example: What I found during those six weeks in Central America wasn't what I **d been looking** for. (Fiction: 2007)

The numbers of examples chosen and the process of choosing them were presented in Section 3.3. The analysis proper is done in two steps:

Step 1: Analyze each example to find out which of the possible meanings associated with the Perfect Progressive they convey. Here we will compare the two meanings presented by the present tense form of the Perfect Progressive, and the two meanings presented by the past tense form of the Perfect Progressive noted above.

Step 2: Take a closer look at the context surrounding each sentence containing the Perfect Progressive to see if the context or genre the example occurs in has an impact on the use of the Perfect Progressive. Here the theoretical foundation from section 2.5 will play a significant role as we look back to try to find clues as to why the Perfect Progressive is used in a particular way. Step 1 and Step 2 will be presented together in the following sections.

It is sometimes difficult to be 100 percent sure of the meaning of a particular construction, especially with regard to the Present Perfect Progressive. The possible meanings of the Present Perfect Progressive are very similar and interpreting which meaning the author/speaker is trying to convey is vital for understanding the piece of text one is reading or the conversation one is engaged in. One is therefore dependent on the expanded context to be sure that the meaning of the sentence containing the Perfect Progressive is interpreted in the way it was intended. It is sometimes a judgment call; we will therefore take a closer look at one example of each of the four meanings, where interpretation of a fuller context was an issue. Following each of these examples arguments for choosing one meaning over the other is given.

Example 1: In addition, law professors like Duke University's James Boyle and Harvard's Jonathan Zittrain **have been working** with Lessig. (ACAD: 2005)

The question here is whether to attribute meaning 1 or meaning 2 to this sentence. Are the law professors still working with Lessig? Or has the collaboration come to an end recently? Both meanings are possible here. However, looking at only the sentence containing the Perfect Progressive and choosing one of the possible meanings over the other may have a fundamental impact on the story. Instead of presupposing that one meaning is more correct than the other, the context must be taken into account, as it will provide clues for the interpretation of the Perfect Progressive.

#### Expanded context of example 1

“dark half”, where he considers whether forces stifling creativity on the Net had already won. # And with the role he played, it is understandable that Lessig took the Eldred decision personally. While Eric Eldred was the plaintiff, Lessig was not just only the lead attorney but the public face of the cause. Lessig works with grassroots organizations that push for Internet freedom, and he has garnered support from film preservationists, librarians and organizations of computer programmers. In addition, law professors like Duke University’s James Boyle and Harvard’s Jonathan Zittrain **have been working** with Lessig. (ACAD: 2005)

In the middle of the text sample it says that; “Lessig works with grassroots organizations....”. The verb in this sentence is in the simple present tense, which means that this is something that concerns the present time. The sentence containing the Perfect Progressive is then likely to be written to convey meaning 1, *actions, events or situations which began in the past and are still continuing*. The law professors have worked with Lessig and they are still working with Lessig, this was at least true when the article was written.

As one can see from the example 1 above, we are very reliant upon context to determine whether or not meaning 1 or 2 should be attributed to the text sample. Below an example of meaning 2 has been included. Meaning 2 is associated with *Actions, events or situations that have only just finished*.

Example 2: I've been saving money every week out of my paycheck, and Dustin's **been working** extra shifts. (Spoken: 2005)

In this example the narrator (the person uttering the sentence) and a man named Dustin have been doing something for someone. The 1<sup>st</sup> person "I" has been saving money every month out of his or her paycheck and Dustin has worked extra shifts. However, whether or not these actions are still continuing, or if they have been recently completed is not easily determined by looking at the sentence alone. This could be an example of meaning 1; *Actions, events or situations which began in the past and are still continuing*. Once again, we must consult the expanded context.

Expanded context of example 2

sell our house. My dad would give them everything he had. LISA THACKER, Hands On Atlanta Wow. So Britney and Bethany, you don't know this, but Dustin and Jinohn flew here with a special gift. Come on out, guys. Sr. Airman Daniel Hazell Oh. LISA THACKER, Hands On Atlanta Jinohn, older sister. Jinohn, tell them what you've done. Staff Sgt. ALFREDO GUERRERO Britney and Bethany, you have no idea, but three years ago, Dustin and I started saving money for you. I've been saving money every week out of my paycheck, and Dustin's **been working** extra shifts. So we are thrilled today to present to you a check for \$ 10,000. LISA THACKER, Hands On Atlanta Of course, we all know that \$ 10,000 is not enough for four years of school, but it is a good start. So keep saving. And now Britney and Bethany, I understand that you are both big fans of our next mystery guest. He's here to also help you today. You finally get to go to your dream school. Dean, move that curtain! Tower How you (Spoken: 2005)

The sentence following the sentence in question goes like this; "So we are thrilled today to present to you a check for \$ 10, 000". This sentence with the time adverbial *today* gives the audience information that calls for the interpretation of this text sample as an example of meaning 2; *actions, events or situations that have only just finished*. They have been saving money and working extra shifts, however today they are presenting someone with a check for \$ 10,000 and their work is done. This is the feeling one gets when reading this example with the expanded context. Furthermore, there is nothing in the expanded context that indicates that these are actions

that are still continuing. On the contrary, by the end of the expanded context these sentences are found; “Of course, we all know that \$ 10,000 is not enough for four years of school, but it is a good start. So keep saving.” It seems as if the receivers of the check are encouraged to save money themselves and not to expect more from Dustin and Jinohn. On the basis of these observations, I have interpreted this as an example of meaning 2.

With regard to the Past Perfect Progressive the meanings are a bit more clear-cut and one is not as dependent on context to interpret the meaning of the sentence. In other words, it is easier to distinguish between the Past Perfect Progressive’s meanings 3 and 4 than meanings 1 and 2 of the Present Perfect Progressive. Nevertheless, I have included text samples conveying meaning 3 and 4 to show how such examples have been analyzed and interpreted and in turn led to the results presented in this chapter.

Example 3: We **had been looking** for a new house. (Fiction: 2008)

Here we have people who had been looking for a new house. It is not stated how long this had been going on. This means that this is an example of meaning 3; *Actions, events or situations which had continued up to the past moment we are thinking about or shortly before it*. No further analysis is needed to see that this is an example of meaning 3 and not meaning 4, since the time span is not stated. The expanded context is included below to illustrate that the Past Perfect Progressive is not as dependent on context as is the case with its present tense equivalent.

Expanded context of example 3

from almost getting the best of us. I guess the pastor hadn’t thought about that one when she made her thoughts known about what a good match we would make. // I started thinking now, as the women’s choir sang “There’s Not a Friend Like the Lowly Jesus,” about the final straw that had caused Ian and me to split. It was so stupid, really, compared to all of the stuff that I had taken off Ian over the years. That final thing really paled in comparison. // We **had been looking** for a new house. One of the reasons was that our family had grown to five members, me, him, our two sons, and my daughter, who I’d had while I was a young teen and unmarried. We were really six if you counted his daughter, Dasche, by his first wife. She didn’t live with us full-time, but she spent a lot of

weekends and vacations with us. // My husband hadn't wanted to go house-hunting with me. He said that (Fiction: 2008)

Nothing in the sentence with the Perfect Progressive or in the surrounding context gives any clue as to *how long* this action has been going on; this is a clear example of meaning 3. The next example is taken from Academic Journals and is an example of meaning 4.

Example 4: To maximize the clarity of the graduates' recall of their programs, interviews were limited to those individuals who **had been working** in their jobs no longer than 2 years since graduation. (ACAD: 2008)

To fulfill the requirements of meaning 4; *used to say how long something had been happening up to a past moment*, the time span must be explicitly stated as in the example above; "(...) no longer than 2 years since graduation". Here we have individuals who have been interviewed and the one of the conditions for being interviewed was that they had not worked longer than 2 years since graduation.

Expanded context of example 4

also detailed in Table 1. The study sought the perspectives of recent graduates and their supervisors about the learning experiences in the nine occupational programs. Graduates had to be employed for at least 6 months in a job for which they had been prepared by their program. This time interval ensured that the graduates interviewed in the study had enough work experience to make knowledgeable judgments about the extent to which they had been adequately prepared for their jobs. To maximize the clarity of the graduates' recall of their programs, interviews were limited to those individuals who **had been working** in their jobs no longer than 2 years since graduation. The rationale for this time interval between graduation and the interview was that the passage of too much time since graduation might hinder the graduates' ability to remember salient features of their programs. Data Collection Information about each program was obtained from instructors and from college Web sites on admission requirements, the courses required to complete the program, the ways courses were taught (i.e., classroom, laboratories, workshops, clinical experience, work-based learning, cooperative education, etc (ACAD: 2008)

The expanded context provides little information with regard to attributing meaning to the sentence containing the Perfect Progressive, since the time span is explicitly stated in the sentence the meaning can be interpreted by looking at the sentence alone.

In the process of analyzing these four examples it became clear that Present Perfect Progressives are more dependent on context for their intended meanings to come across than is the case for the Past Perfect Progressive, where the meaning is very often straightforwardly found by looking at the sentences containing the Perfect Progressive only. This has to do with the fact that the meanings of the Past Perfect Progressive are more easily distinguished from one another, than those of the Present Perfect Progressive.

## 5.0 The analysis

The analysis has been carried out by looking at each of the examples, i.e. the sentence containing the Perfect Progressive and the relevant context, to find which of the possible meanings associated with the Perfect Progressive the example conveys, as seen in the four examples above. In the following sections the results from the analysis are presented, by use of graphs and pie charts followed by a description and an analysis of the results.

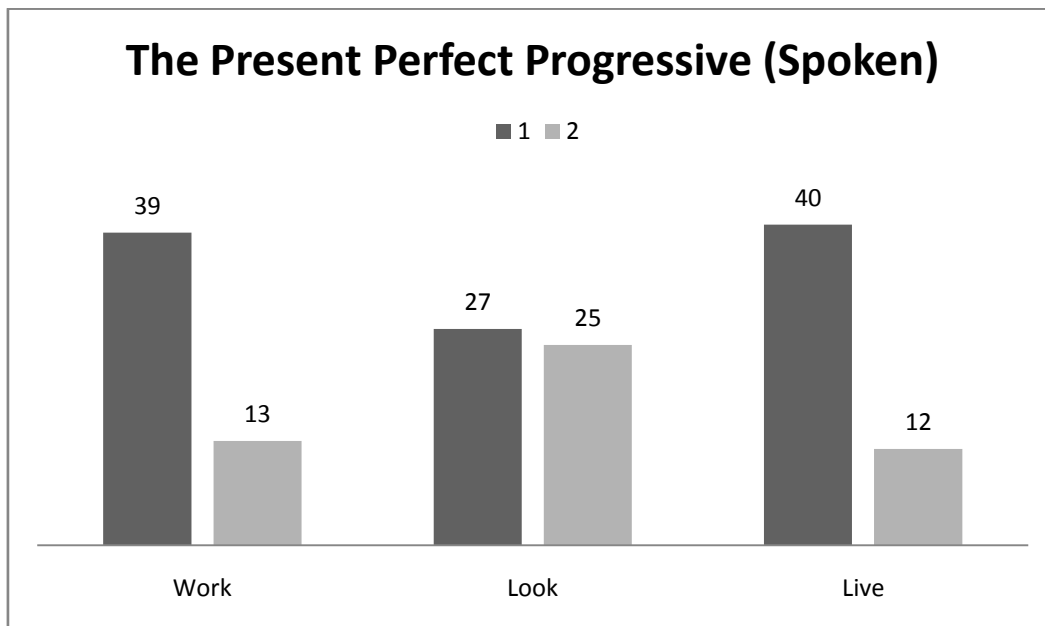
It should be stressed that these are tendencies based on the material I have chosen to investigate in this thesis, and not general statements about genres or American English. Below I refer to some results as representing a genre as a whole, however with *whole* I here mean the whole represented by the three verbs investigated in this thesis.

There is a total of 93 536 instances of the Perfect Progressive in COCA and in this thesis we are looking at only 684 of these instances and they represent three verbs. Within each genre there are 52 examples of the Present Perfect Progressive and 26 examples of the Past Perfect Progressive with each verb. The reason why there are 52 with the Present Perfect Progressive is due to the fact that there are 26 examples for *has* [vbn] [vvg] and 26 examples for *have* [vbn] [vvg], and the Past Perfect Progressive is only represented by *had*, the abbreviated forms 's, 've and 'd are also

included here. Because of lack of material there are fewer examples for Academic Journals. Please see Section 3.3 for further information on how these examples were chosen.

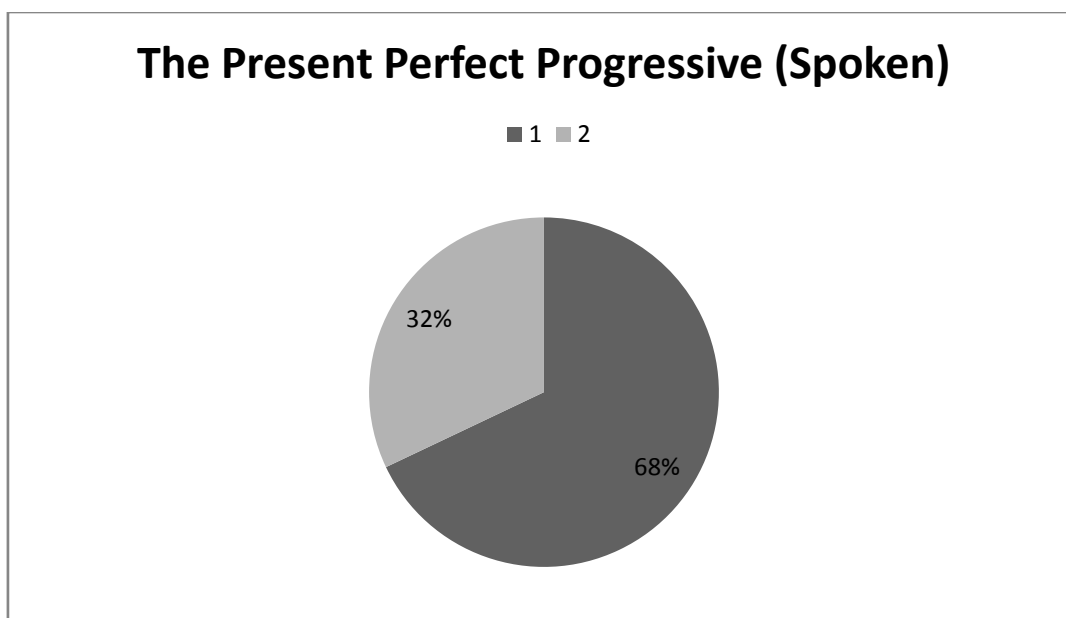
### 5.0.1 Spoken

This section deals with the Spoken genre found in COCA and it is divided into The Present Perfect Progressive and the Past Perfect Progressive. 234 text samples have been analyzed and figures and tables will give an overview of the use of the Perfect Progressive in the Spoken genre with *work*, *look* and *live*. The examples are mostly from television shows.



**Figure 14.** The distribution of meanings 1 and 2 of the Present Perfect Progressive within Spoken.

Figure 14 shows the distribution of meaning 1 and 2 of the Present Perfect Progressive within Spoken. The results with grammatical auxiliaries “have/’ve” and “has/’s” have been analyzed together ( $26 + 26 = 52$ ) with all three verbs and we can observe that there is a preference for meaning 1, *Actions, events or situations which began in the past and are still continuing*. This preference is quite striking with both *work* and *live*, however *look* shows a more even distribution between meaning 1 and meaning 2.



**Figure 15.** The distribution of meanings 1 and 2 of the Present Perfect Progressive within Spoken.

Figure 15 is based on the same numbers as Figure 14, and shows the distribution of meaning 1 vs. 2 where the three verbs have been treated together. This is done to show which of the meanings are preferred in the Spoken genre. It should again be stressed that the Spoken genre is here only represented by three verbs and this does not give an accurate picture of the entire Spoken genre as it is found in COCA.

Figure 15 shows that meaning 1 is used in 68 % of the examples examined, whereas meaning 2 is only used in 32% of the examples, suggesting that sentences with the Present Perfect Progressive of *work/live/look* in Spoken have a clear preference for meaning 1. In other words, the speakers want to convey something that started in the past and which is still going on, as in example 5 below.

Example 5: She was born with the name Artis, and for most of her 82 years, Artis Lane **has been living** up to that name, sculpting and painting for as long as she can remember. (Spoken: 2009)

In this example there is a woman who has been working as an artist her entire life and she is still working as an artist at the time when this story aired in 2009. This is a straight-forward example of something beginning in the past and still continuing.



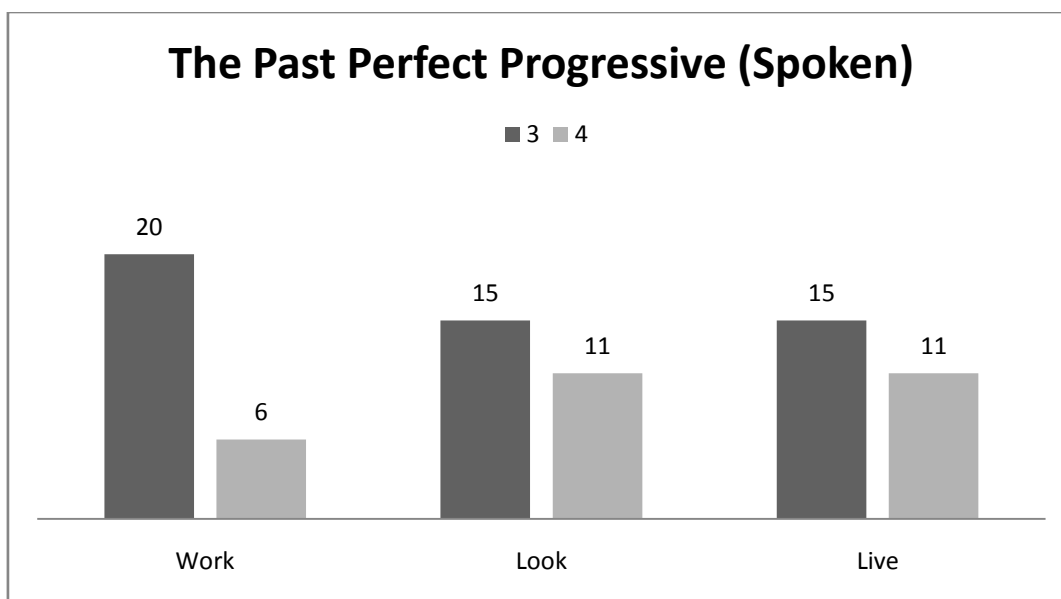
The preference for meaning 1 within Spoken is attested in Figures 14 and 15. As mentioned in Section 2.5.2 the texts found in the Spoken genre in COCA are taken from TV and radio programs and this indicates that the conversations are going on at the present time. The guests are talking about something they have gotten involved with in the past and which they are still involved with, for instance volunteer work, political campaigns, etc. Nonetheless, there should also be good reasons for choosing meaning 2 when appearing on shows like these, because the guests are probably asked to appear on the shows to talk about something that they are taking part in or that they have just taken part in. They are invited to talk about something important that has happened in their life, the action, event or situation may have stopped recently. Nevertheless it may still have impact on their current life situation. Included below is an example of meaning 2, found in the Spoken sample.

Example 6: Their youngest, we'll call her Jazz, is a 6-year-old who **has been living** with a secret until now. (Spoken: 2008)

This is a straight-forward example of meaning 2; here we have a child who has been living with a secret until now. "Until now" are important words in this sentence as they indicate that this situation has *just finished* and that this sentence conveys meaning 2. We get no indication as to what this secret entails, however this is not the important thing here, the important thing is that this is a situation that has taken place but has ended very recently.

Earlier in this chapter it was argued that sentences with the Present Perfect Progressive were highly dependent on context for their meaning to come across; as can be seen from the two previous examples this is not always the case. Nevertheless, it is more often the case with the Present Perfect Progressive than the Past Perfect Progressive, and these examples represent a minority of the examples.

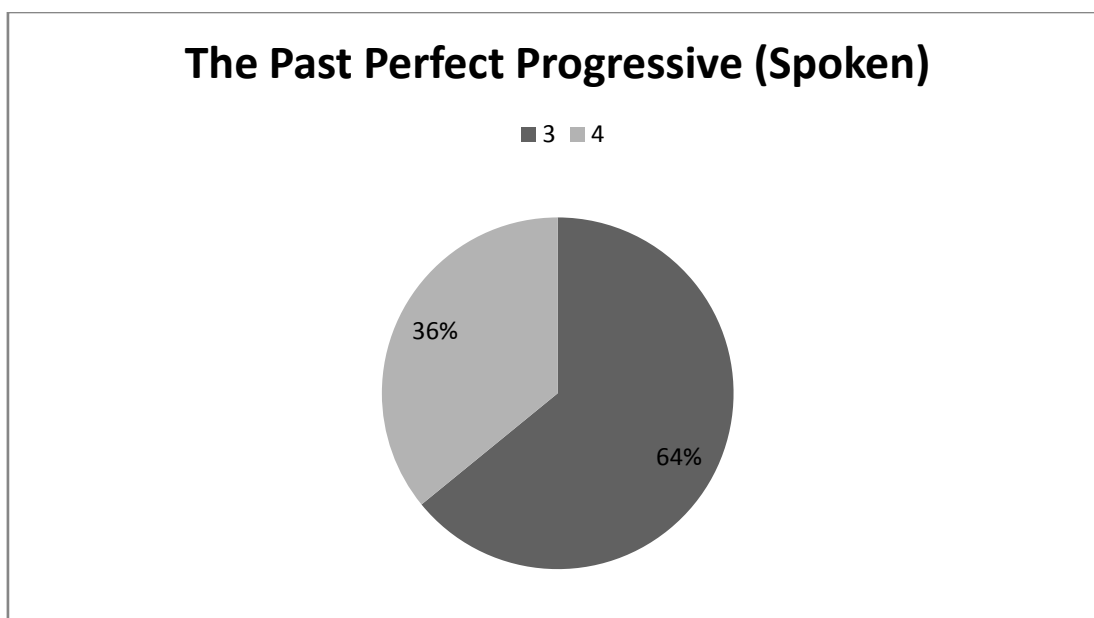
We will now take a closer look at the meaning distribution of the Past Perfect Progressive in the Spoken genre.



**Figure 16.** The distribution of meanings 3 and 4 of the Past Perfect Progressive within Spoken.

Figure 16 shows the distribution of meanings 3 and 4 of the Past Perfect Progressive within the Spoken genre, 26 examples for each verb. The figure shows that there is a preference for meaning 3 with the verbs *work*, *look* and *live*. Meaning 3; *Actions, events or situations which had continued up to the past moment we are thinking about or shortly before it*. In other words, the action, event or situation the speaker is referring to is finished at an undefined time in the past. The preference for meaning 3 over meaning 4 is highest in sentences with *work*. There is a slight discrepancy between meaning 3 and 4 (15 vs. 11) for *look* and *live*, the results are coincidentally identical.

Figure 17, shows the distribution of meanings 3 and 4 of all three verbs added together and the numbers speak very clearly; there is a preference for meaning 3 when using the Past Perfect Progressive in the Spoken data. The distribution of meaning 3 is 64 % and the distribution of meaning 4 is 36%.



**Figure 17.** The distribution of meanings 3 and 4 of the Past Perfect Progressive within Spoken.

In section 2.5.2 the focus was on the fact that there is a preference for present tense verbs in spoken material. In addition, when the past tense is used, there is a preference for meaning 3, which is the meaning of the two that is most similar to the meanings of the Present Perfect Progressive. Even if the actions, events or situations found in sentences conveying meaning 3 have in fact come to an end it may be easier to link them to the present time, than for instance sentences conveying meaning 4 where the time span is explicitly stated and not easily omitted.

Example 7: She left the hotel where she’**d been living** and the new cell phone number she had the last time we caught up with her. (Spoken: 2006)

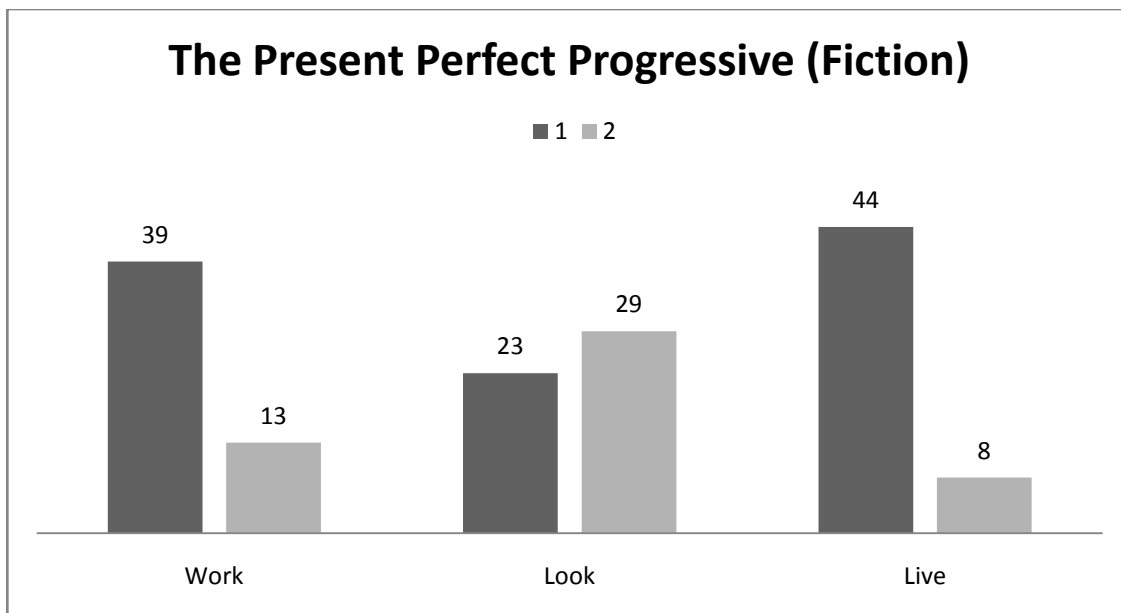
In this example there is a woman, who has lived in a hotel, but she is not living there anymore at the moment of speaking; she has left. This is an example of meaning 3; *actions, events or situations which had continued up to the past moment we are thinking about or shortly before it.*

In the following example (8), we have a man named Sam Israel who did something for two years, namely lived on bail and tended to his health problems and cooperated with the authorities. This is a clear example of meaning 4; *Used to say how long something had been happening up to a past moment.* The time span, “two years” is explicitly stated in the sentence and this could not be confused with an example of meaning 3.

Example 8: Leading up to his sentencing, Sam Israel **had been living** free on bail for more than two years, tending to his health problems and cooperating with authorities trying to trace the missing Bayou millions. (Spoken: 2009)

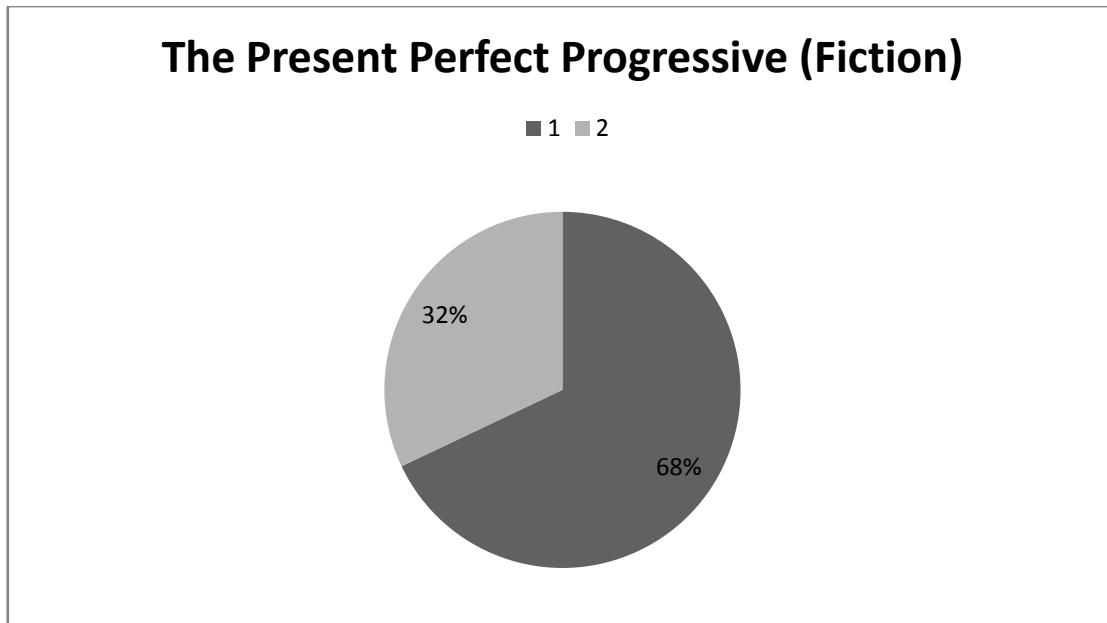
### 5.0.2 Fiction

As with the Spoken genre, 234 Fiction examples have been analyzed and the result of this analysis is presented below. We start by looking at the results from the Present Perfect Progressive samples. The examples analyzed are mostly from conversation/ dialogue and some storytelling.



**Figure 18.** The distribution of meanings 1 and 2 of the Present Perfect Progressive within Fiction.

Figure 18 gives an overview of the distribution of meanings found in Fiction. When examining the numbers one can see that there is an obvious preference for meaning 1 with both *work* and *live*. However, in sentences with *look* in the Present Perfect Progressive there are more instances of meaning 2. Why there are more instances of meaning 2 with this particular verb is hard to say and looking through the text samples there is nothing that strikes me as possible reasons for this result. Sadly, to go into this in more detail would be beyond the scope of the present investigation. However, it may suggest that the main verb plays a crucial role with regard to distribution of meaning.



**Figure 19.** The distribution of meanings 1 and 2 of the Present Perfect Progressive within Fiction.

Figure 19 gives the overall distribution of meanings 1 and 2 within Fiction. There is a preference for meaning 1 of 68% whereas meaning 2 is used in 32% of the text samples. However, in this case it is important to keep in mind that *look* has a preference for meaning 2 and this does not come across by studying Figure 19 alone.

As mentioned in Section 2.5.3, the Present Perfect Progressive is expected to be used in Fiction when one encounters dialogue. The two examples below (9 and 10), meanings 1 and 2 respectively, represent the Present Perfect Progressive used in Fiction in representations of dialogue/ conversation.

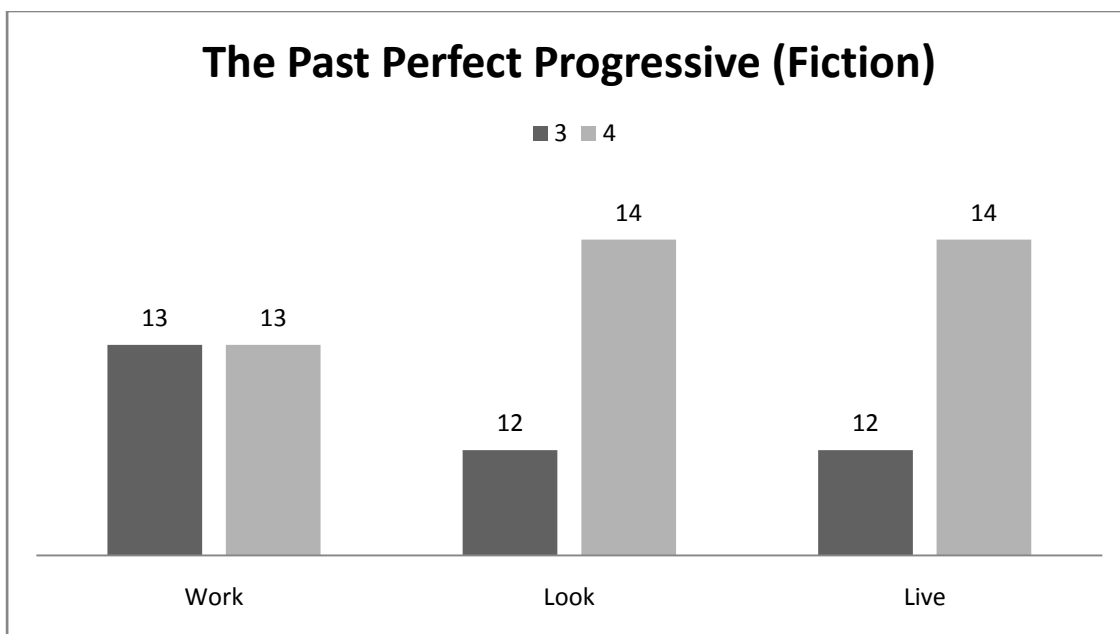
Example 9: “No, Mother. Here in Portland. For the last three years I’ve **been living** in this ashram. You know like in India...” (Fiction: 2006)

In this example we have a person telling his or her mother about his or her living arrangement for the past three years. Looking at the example in isolation it is hard to be completely sure which meaning the speaker wants to convey, however, by looking at the context this seems to be an example of meaning 1. The speakers seem to be content with his or her living arrangements which began in the past and are still continuing at the moment of speaking.

Example 10: “Yes, but since then he’s **been living** in Rome as some kind of apostolic secretary to one of the cardinals. Now he’s back at the Church of Nativity.” (Fiction: 2008).

Here the sentence following the sentence with the Present Perfect Progressive has been added, and this is done because it is necessary for interpreting the meaning of the example. We have a man who has been living in Rome and been employed by one of the cardinals and looking at this sentence alone it could be interpreted that he is still living in Rome and still working for the cardinal, however by looking at the next sentence we see that this is an example of meaning 2.

Moving on to the Past Perfect Progressive in Fiction, Figure 20 shows that there is a preference for meaning 4 in sentences with *look* and *live*, and it seems as if the preference is identical coincidentally. When it comes to *work* the results are identical for meanings 3 and 4; 13 instances of meaning 3 and 13 instances of meaning 3. Below two examples, one from each meaning has been included.



**Figure 20.** The distribution of meanings 3 and 4 of the Past Perfect Progressive within Fiction.

Example 11: He guessed they’d **been working** up north of his position. (Fiction: 2007)

This is an example of meaning 3 in a sentence with the main verb *work*. A man is making assumptions about somebody's place of business in this sentence. However, the most important thing in this sentence is the verb phrase containing the Past Perfect Progressive and the fact that they are no longer working there.

Example 12: Eight years she'd **been working** there, and he thought he could get her up to \$ 9,50 an hour. (Fiction: 2008)

This sentence says something about *how long* something had been happening up to a past moment and this is clearly an example of meaning 4.

There are no "typical" examples found in the group of *work* in the Past Perfect Progressive which indicates why there is an even division between the two meanings, this is probably coincidental or the result of stylistic choices among the writers when using the verb *work*. On the other hand, it may have something to do with the fact that the verb *work* may come across as a more continuous process than for instance *look*.

As mentioned earlier, within Fiction there is "a strong preference for past tense verbs" (Biber et al. 1999: 456), and this will explain why there is a preference for the Past Perfect Progressive over the Present Perfect Progressive in works of Fiction. However, this does not explain why there is a preference for meaning 4 than for meaning 3. Meaning 4 is *used to say how long something had been happening up to a past moment*. In other words, the sentences that express meaning 4 are sentences that explicitly tell us how long something has been going on. This is a favorable trait for a meaning utilized in works of Fiction, such as novels and short stories, where time span often plays an important role.

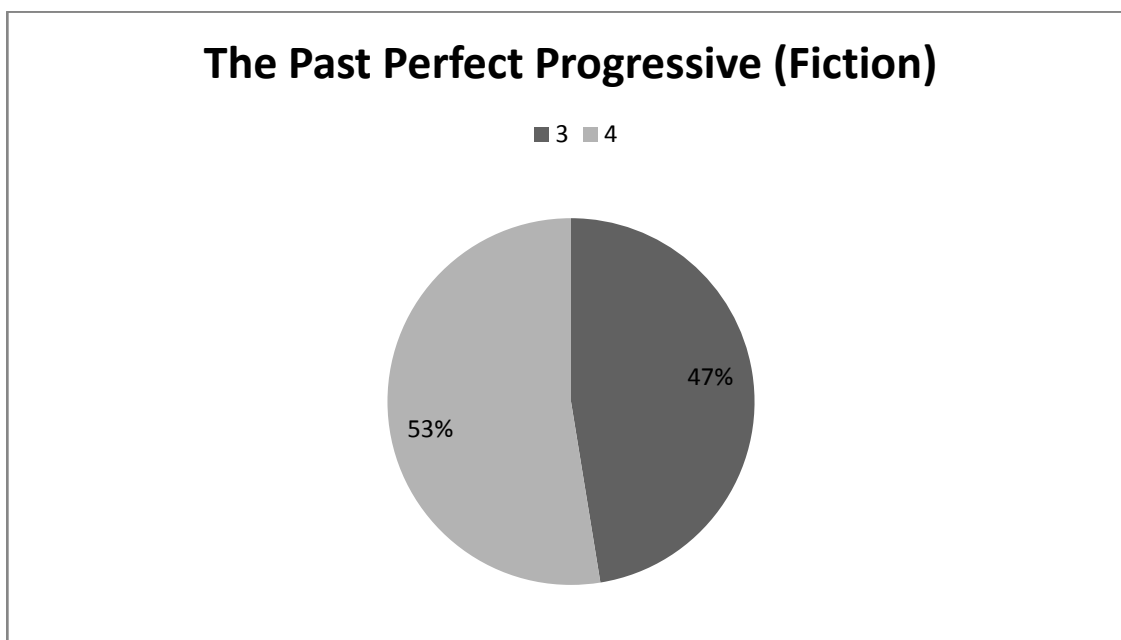
Example 13: As if I knew where Mama **had been living** for the past twenty-some years. (Fiction: 2005).

In this example we have a person who has no idea where his or her "Mama" has had residence for a time period of about twenty years. The time span is explicitly stated in the sentence and this is therefore an example of meaning 4.

As mentioned in Section 2.5.3, when someone tells a story it is more often than not done by the use of the past tense and this may be done because what happened in the past still carries some sort of relevance to the present time. This is a good argument for using meaning 3 in Fiction, especially in short stories and narratives, because meaning 3 tells us something that continued up to the past moment we are thinking about or shortly before it.

Example 14: A few weeks before, my children **had been living** the relatively normal, scheduled lives of children in the suburbs; three meals a day, playing on the swing set in our fenced backyard, watching cartoons, baths at seven, bed at eight. (Fiction: 2009)

This is an example of meaning 3 and a somewhat typical example of storytelling/narration. Here we have a mother or father rambling on about her or his kids' life situation, until something changed a few weeks ago.



**Figure 21.** The distribution of meanings 3 and 4 of the Past Perfect Progressive within Fiction.

Figure 21 depicts the distribution of meanings 3 and 4 of the Past Perfect Progressive in Fiction, all three verbs together. Within Fiction there is a small preference for meaning 4, it is used 6 % more than meaning 3. 6% is of course not an overwhelming difference and this may not be significant; it could be that this difference just happened to occur in the random sample investigated in this thesis, and it may not be true for the genre as a whole. Nevertheless, this

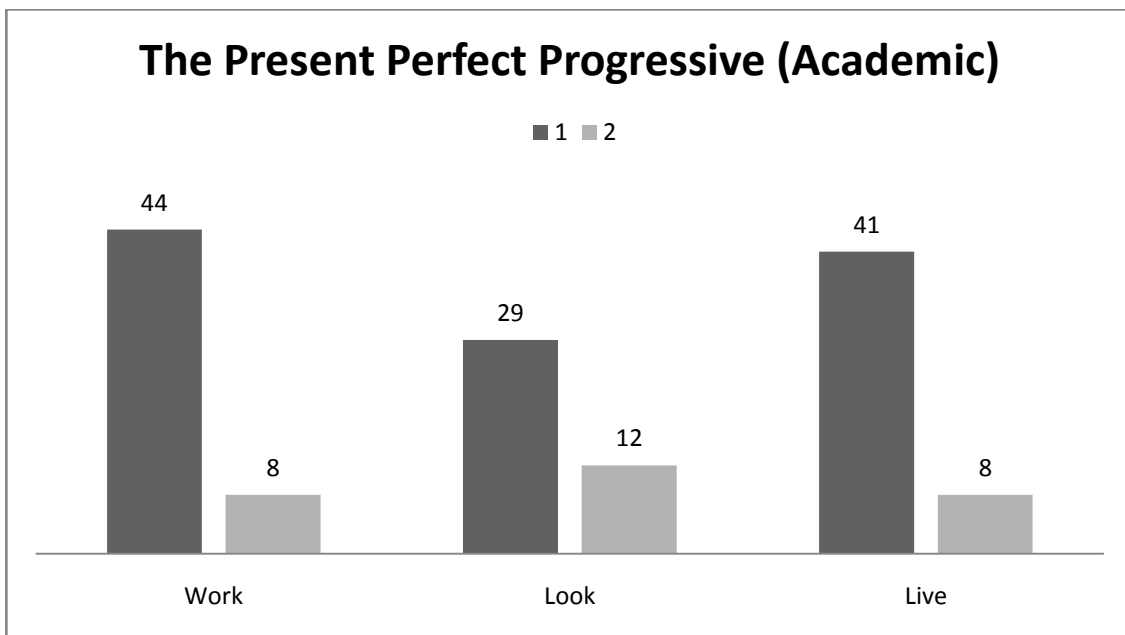


preference should be examined further and there are aspects speaking in favor of this use (meaning 4) in Fiction, for instance the fact that it explicitly tells the readers about time span, about *how long* something has been going on and this is often useful when telling a story, to make it more believable for instance. Both *look* and *live* showed a preference for meaning 4 and with *work* it was a tie.

There are aspects speaking for the use of both meaning 3 and meaning 4 in works of Fiction, it all depends on what the writer wants to depict. However, these results show a preference for meaning 4.

### 5.0.3 Academic Journals

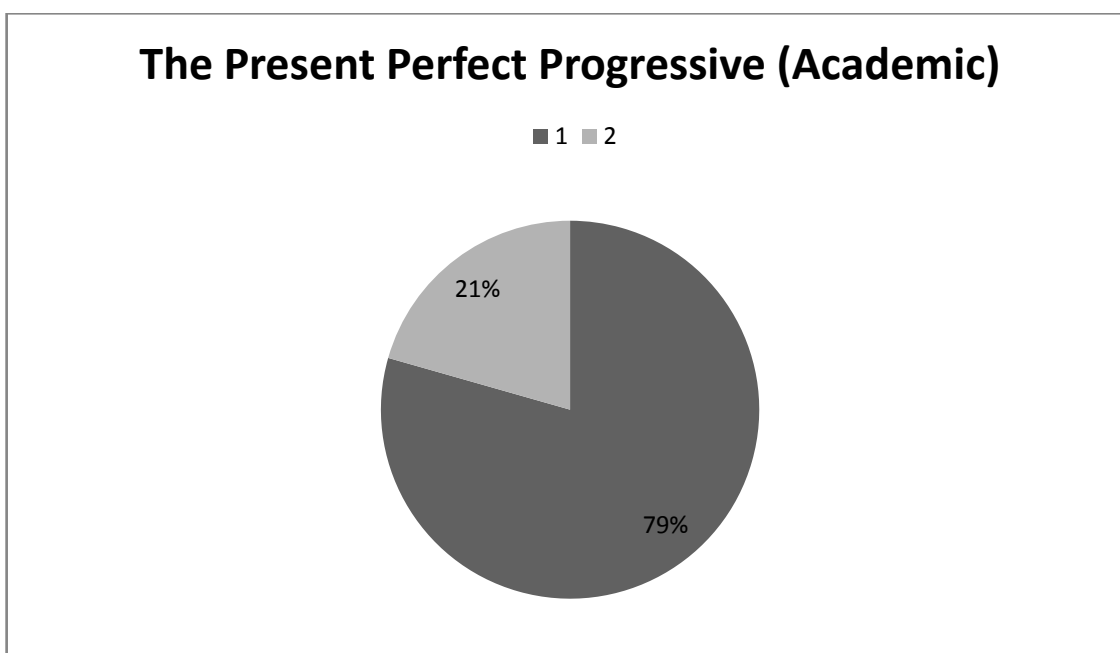
In this section there are fewer examples than with the previous two genres, with Academic Journals only 218 examples have been analyzed and this is due to the fact that there in some cases were not enough instances of sentences with the Perfect Progressive and the verb in question, as for instance was the case with the Present Perfect Progressive and *look*. Since the Academic Journals genre is only compared with itself and not the other genres the fact that there are fewer instances has no particular relevance.



**Figure 22.** The distribution of meanings 1 and 2 of the Present Perfect Progressive within Academic Journals.

Figure 22 shows the distribution of meanings 1 and 2 of the Present Perfect Progressive within Academic Journals. There is a slight discrepancy with regard to the number of examples examined with each verb; 52 for *work*, 41 for *look* and 49 for *live*. Nevertheless, the overall results show that there is a preference for meaning 1 with all the verbs and the numbers speak very clearly.

The pie chart below (Figure 23) clearly shows that there is a preference for meaning 1, as a matter of fact, 79 % of the sentences with the Present Perfect Progressive in Academic Journals are interpreted to convey meaning 1, as opposed to only 21 % for meaning 2.



**Figure 23.** The distribution of meanings 1 and 2 of the Present Perfect Progressive within Academic Journals.

Example 15: One said: “I’ve **been looking** for work and I am not getting anywhere.” (ACAD: 2004)

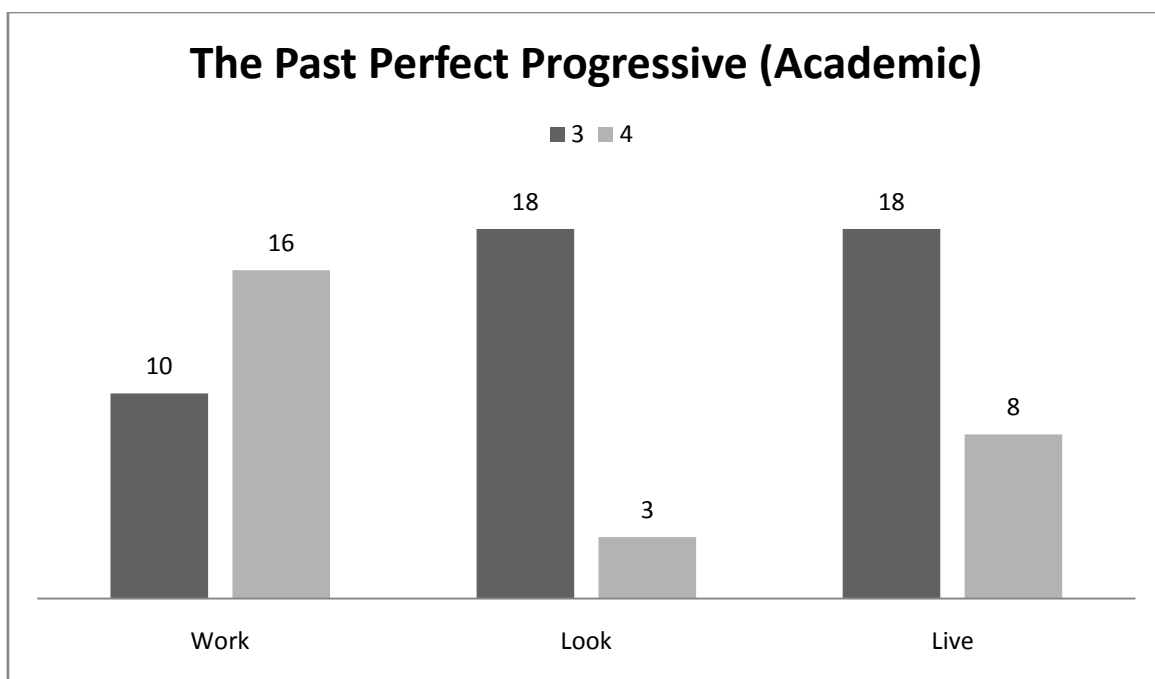
In this example we have a person who is looking for work and this is likely to be still going on at the present time, since the Present Perfect Progressive “’ve been looking” is preceded by “and I am not getting anywhere”. There is nothing in this sentence that leads the reader to think that this

is a situation that has *just finished*, it is more likely that it is *still continuing*. Example 15 is an example of meaning 1.

Example 16: Not every instance of protracted hiatus between subject and verb is as resistant to easy reading as those we **have been looking** at. (ACAD: 2005)

This is another instance of an intricate example where the expanded context is needed in order to make a well-informed decision with regard to this sentence conveying meaning 1 or meaning 2. Without looking at the context this example is ambiguous in meaning, however a quick look at the context revealed this as an example of meaning 2.

In Section 2.5.1, it was mentioned that there is a preference for the present tense in Academic language, since this is the tense that seems to give something relevance in present time. Giving something relevance in the present time should be a favored trait for people writing scientific articles as it gives the articles and the theories and results presented in the article relevance in the present time, even if the article was written some time ago. Using the present tense also allows the reader to take more part in the step by step process of the article, as one can get the feeling that one is taking part in the process of writing the article or in the process leading up to the writing of the article.



**Figure 24.** The distribution of meanings 3 and 4 of the Past Perfect Progressive within Academic Journals.

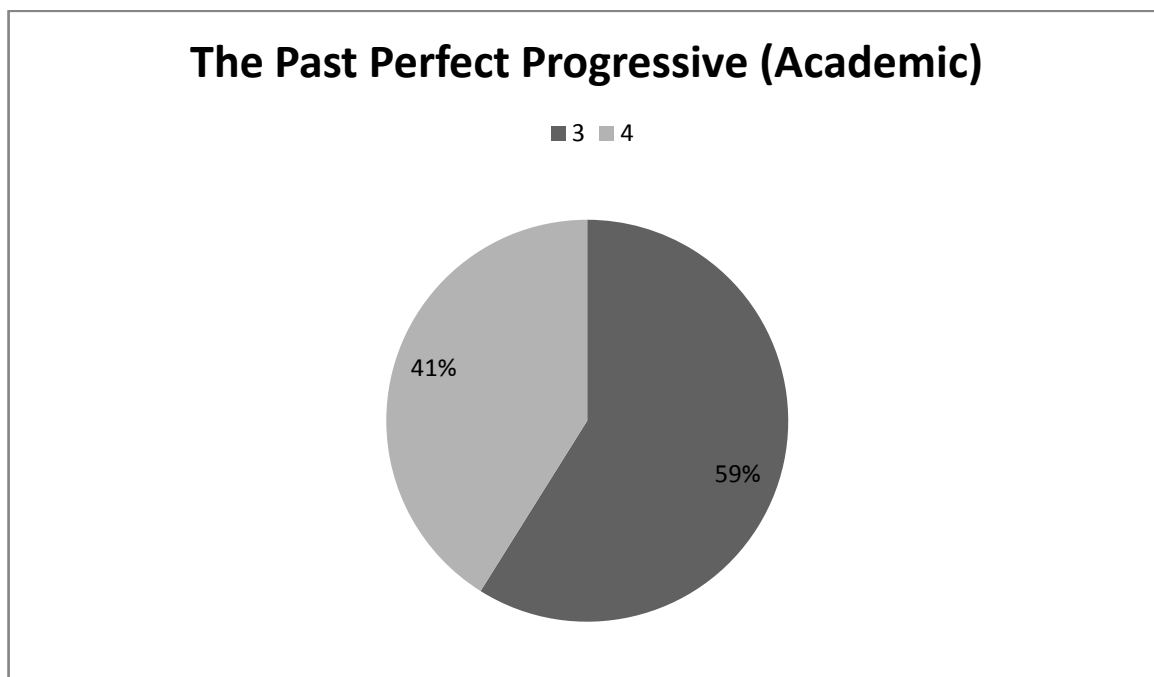
Figure 24 shows the distribution of meanings 3 and 4 of the Past Perfect Progressive within Academic Journals. In sentences with the Past Perfect Progressive and *work* there is a preference for meaning 4, whereas in sentences where *live* or *look* operate as main verb there is a preference for meaning 3. There are 26 examples for *work* and *live*, however only 21 could be found for *look*.

Example 17: I **had been working** my way through a steep, narrow passageway on my belly.  
(ACAD: 2009)

This is an example of meaning 3, it says nothing about *how long* the action has taken place and it is written in the past tense, therefore it must be an example of meaning 3.

Example 18: Williams **had been looking** at the origins of culture, since the 1940's when he co-founded the review Politics and Letters. (ACAD: 2000)

Example 18 is an example of meaning 4; telling us how long something has been happening up to a moment in the past.



**Figure 25.** The distribution of meanings 3 and 4 of the Past Perfect Progressive within Academic Journals.

As one can see from Figure 25 there is a preference for meaning 3 in the Academic Journals genre in COCA. Sentences with meaning 3 occur in 59 % of the examples and sentences expressing meaning 4 occur in 41 % of the examples. This does not give an accurate picture, since there are more instances of meaning 4 with *work*. However, for the genre as a whole there is a preference for meaning 3.

## 5.1 Summing up

The analysis in this chapter has been performed in order to find answers to the last research question posed in this thesis, namely *Is there a difference in how the different meanings of the Perfect Progressive are distributed across the genres?*

There is a difference in the use of the Perfect Progressive depending on genre, and this difference is seen when looking at which meanings are used most often in the genres. **Table 6** sums up the most important results of this analysis, giving the preferred meaning found in all three genres.

**Table 6.** An overview of the preferred meaning in Spoken, Fiction and Academic Journals

GENRE	Preferred Meaning of the Perfect Progressive	
	PRESENT PERFECT PROGRESISVE	PAST PERFECT PROGRESSIVE
Spoken	1	3
Fiction	1	4
Academic Journals	1	3

Here we can see that the results are almost identical for all three genres, meaning 1 of the Present Perfect Progressive is preferred in all three. However, there is a difference in terms of how clear this preference is compared to meaning 2. In Spoken the overall use of meaning 1 amounts to 68% compared to only 32 % for meaning 2, in Fiction the percentages are exactly the same as they are with Spoken, whereas in Academic Journals the distribution is 79% for meaning 1 and 21 % for meaning 2. With regard to the Past Perfect Progressive meaning 3 is preferred in Spoken and Academic Journals, however in Fiction meaning 4 is used in a few more instances than meaning 3. Finding reasons for these results has not been easy, for instance, both meanings of the Past Perfect Progressive serve as favored for works of fiction. This is also the case for the other genres and the other meanings. Nevertheless, much of the reason must be attributed to the speakers/authors in this case, and also the subjects they have chosen to talk/write about.

The analysis also conveyed the fact that the Perfect Progressive is dependent on context in order for its intended meaning to come across. This is especially true for the Present Perfect Progressive since its meanings are sometimes hard to distinguish from one another. This is not genre specific, rather something that follows the Perfect Progressive.

Furthermore, in addition to the analysis presented above the sentence structure or composition of the same examples has been looked at. This was done to investigate whether the composition of a sentence with the Perfect Progressive found in Fiction would be different from one found in Spoken or Academic Journals. I looked at the Subject of each sentence and at the element that followed directly after the Perfect Progressive. I found that 99 percent of the subjects were nouns,

noun phrases or pronouns and that the element directly after were 80 % prepositions and prepositional phrases and the rest were adverbs, adjectives or nouns. So the notion that there was a difference in the composition of the sentences was wrong, and it tells us more about the use of the three verbs *work*, *look* and *live* than the Perfect Progressive as these are verbs are intransitive and the expected patterns emerged. The fact that the subjects are made up of nouns, pronouns and noun phrases is not surprising either as these grammatical items often function as subjects and the function of the subjects is that of agent or sensor.

# 6 Conclusions and Evaluations

This chapter sums up the previous chapters, and the outcome of the analysis is seen in connection to the initial hypothesis.

## 6.0 Conclusions

The overall aim of this thesis was to provide a comprehensive overview of the use of the Perfect Progressive in Present-day American English, and a secondary aim was to shed some light on this grammatical construction. The comprehensive overview was pursued in Chapters 4 and 5, where material retrieved from COCA was analyzed. The latter aim was pursued throughout the thesis. I have studied the information accumulated through the searches performed in COCA and feel confident that the material forms an adequately accurate picture of the use of the Perfect Progressive in Present-day American English. I have stated several times throughout this thesis that the verbs and genres investigated are the ones that will be used as a basis for the conclusions, and that the conclusions are mere tendencies based on a comparatively small set of data.

Chapter 2 gave the theoretical foundations used in this thesis, while Chapter 3 described the methods employed and introduced the primary source of material, COCA. In Chapters 4 and 5 material from searches performed in COCA was analyzed to find answers to the research questions posed.

In Chapter 4 we saw that the overall distribution of the Perfect Progressive in COCA amounted to 0.023% of the total number of words in COCA. A comparison of the total distribution of the Perfect Progressive, the Progressive Aspect and the Perfect Aspect with *work*, *live* and *look* showed that the Perfect Progressive is a rare grammatical construction confirming what Leech (2004) and Biber et al. (1999) have written about the use of the Perfect Progressive. With regard to the distribution of the Perfect Progressive across the genres Spoken, Fiction and Academic Journals the results showed that the distribution differed depending on which main verb was used. The frequency was highest in Spoken with *work*, and in Fiction with *live* and *look*. These results brought forth an urge to investigate reasons for this; whether this had to do with the distribution of the main verb or if the distribution of the Perfect Progressive itself was the most



important factor. Due to the limited sample, of only three verbs, the following tendencies or results should be considered with some caution. I found that the reasons for this discrepancy in results across the genres (cf. Figures 5, 6 and 7) seems to be related to the verb form- Perfect Progressive itself and that there is in fact a difference in the distribution of the Perfect Progressive in terms of genre; regardless of verb distribution. This assumption was confirmed in the case of *work* and *live*, but proved somewhat wrong by *look*. However, the overall tendency must be said to be that the Perfect Progressive is an important factor for the distribution within the genres.

With regard to tense there is a marked difference in the distribution of the Past Perfect Progressive versus the Present Perfect Progressive when looking at Spoken, Fiction and Academic Journals. The Present Perfect Progressive has the highest frequency in Spoken with all three verbs, and the Past Perfect Progressive has the highest frequency with all three verbs in Fiction. This confirms what Biber et al. (1999) said about the use of the Perfect Progressives; when this construction was used it was used in Past tense and in Fiction. That there is a “strong preference for past tense verbs” (Biber et al. 1999: 456) in Fiction and a preference for present tense verbs in Spoken (cf. Biber et al. 1999: 457) may explain this distribution. Nevertheless, my data also revealed that the discrepancy between the Present and the Past Perfect Progressive in Fiction is slight, which in a way runs counter to what Biber et al. claim.

Furthermore, there is an overall preference for the Present Perfect Progressive in COCA, and when we look at the “top 100” results we see that the Past Perfect Progressive only amounts to 22%, whereas the Present Perfect Progressive amounts to 78%. This same tendency is seen when looking at the three verbs and three genres investigated in this thesis. In conclusion, there is a difference in the distribution of the Perfect Progressive depending on tense.

In Chapter 5, a qualitative analysis of 684 text samples from COCA was performed in order to find an answer to the last research question I pose in this thesis; *Is there a difference in how the different meanings of the Perfect Progressive are distributed across the genres?* The answer to this question is yes, based on the investigated material. In all the genres there is a preference for meaning 1 of the Present Perfect Progressive, in terms of the Past Perfect Progressive there is

preference for meaning 3 in Spoken and Academic Journals, and meaning 4 in Fiction. However, it should be noted that there is a difference as to how clear these preferences are within each genre. With regard to Spoken and the Present Perfect Progressive there is an overall use of meaning 1 of 68% compared to 32 % of meaning 2, in Fiction we find the exact same numbers as we do in Spoken. In Academic Journals, on the other hand, meaning 1 is used in 79 % of the cases while meaning 2 is used in 21% of the cases. The Past Perfect Progressive's meaning 3 is preferred in Spoken and Academic Journals, however in Fiction there are a few more instances of meaning 4. In conclusion, there is a difference in the use of the Perfect Progressive depending on genre; however, the difference is not so marked.

Another finding that became evident when analyzing the text samples in Chapter 5 was that the Perfect Progressive is dependent on context in order for its intended meaning to come across. This is especially true for the Present Perfect Progressive since its meanings are sometimes hard to distinguish from one another. The meanings of the Past Perfect Progressive are not so hard to tell apart, and they are therefore not as dependent on the context for their meaning to come across. This is not genre specific, rather something that follows the Perfect Progressive, since it occurred in all the three genres investigated.

The hypothesis, *There is a difference in the distribution and use of the Perfect Progressive depending on genre and tense*, has been the foundation of this thesis and all the research questions have been formed in order to confirm or reject it. Based on the material investigated in this thesis we can say that there is a difference in the distribution of the Perfect Progressive depending on genre and tense, and this difference is quite marked with regard to tense, and also prevalent in terms of genre. The investigation of the use of the Perfect Progressive showed that there is a difference in the use depending on genre and also tense, however the characteristics of tense is somewhat intricate since each of the tenses has its own two meanings that they convey. Still we can see that there is a discrepancy in Fiction where there is a preference for the Past Perfect Progressive meaning 4, and a preference for meaning 3 in Spoken and Academic Journals. In conclusion, I feel that the hypothesis to a certain point has been confirmed in terms of the distribution of the Perfect Progressive being different depending on genre or tense, it is also correct in terms of difference in the use of the Perfect Progressive depending on genre and

tense, albeit not to the same high degree. Nevertheless, it could be claimed that some of the most important results that have come out of this thesis lie outside the scope of the hypothesis, namely that the Present Perfect Progressive is highly dependent on context for its intended meanings to come across and also that there is a tendency showing that the distribution of each verb in the Perfect Progressive in each of the genres is more dependent on the Perfect Progressive itself than the total distribution of the main verb in COCA.

## **6.1 Evaluations**

The present thesis contributes to the field of grammar and the information that has come across through the analysis and work with this thesis could perhaps be useful for textbooks and grammars which aim to offer as accurate descriptions of American English as possible.

When I started working on this thesis I had no clue as to how it would turn out and looking back I see that there are many changes that could be made. If I were to do this all over again, I may have chosen to include all five genres in COCA and/or a few additional verbs. However, I am still convinced that space and time constraints would have made this difficult.

Nevertheless, there are several possible expansions of this thesis. For instance, looking at the Perfect Progressive in a diachronic perspective preferably in the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) which will be made available in December 2010. Another possibility would be to compare American English and British English using COCA and the British National Corpus. Further, an investigation of other and more verbs and genres would certainly be worthwhile.

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